

In Search of The Wider Self

By Caroline Frizell

I have a story to share.

'Coming Down to Earth' relates one woman's embodied discovery of a wider self. Before sharing the story, I have briefly outlined the concept of this expanded identity within a model of the ecological self. This is a self which is rooted in our physical presence in the biosphere and which extends beyond the individual ego. The idea of the ecological self provides an inclusive framework which offers connectivity and belonging which is both meaningful and healing. In the following pages I have explored how the concept of the ecological self can support my work as a Dance Movement Therapist as thoughts, feelings, actions and spiritual connections come together in the dynamic balance of body mind and soul and are fed by a connection with the earth.

The concept of the ecological self emerges as we explore our earth story, that is our identity in relation to the earth. As the media focuses increasingly on the impact of global warming, we find ourselves concerned, both as individuals and as a species, with our relationship to the earth as our collective home. This concern highlights how our individual identities and our relationships with each other do not exist within a vacuum. So within this context of a wider community, how do we define who we are?

Arne Naess suggests that we are apt to confuse the 'self' with the narrow concept of the ego. He suggests that our 'ecological self' (Naess 1995 p.225) transcends the individual ego, and its discovery can lead us towards an experience of a self with greater breadth and depth than the self which is defined by its separateness. Our individual identity then becomes characterised by a unit connected to a greater whole and exists through a reciprocal relationship with each other and the environment. The inherent healing capacity of this connection becomes a process of 'healing our relations to the widest community- that of all living beings.' (Naess 1995 p.236) As we identify with something bigger than our individual ego, we can discover an inclusive perspective on ourselves which meets a universal need to be valued and to belong,

This sense of identifying with the earth was brought to my attention some time ago by Leila, a three year old. Leila and her mother attended a community Dance Movement Therapy group for pre-school children, parents and carers. In our enclosed, urban therapy space we were travelling across a wild terrain to 'The Bear Went Over The Mountain'. For those of you unfamiliar with this rhythmic, repetitive song, a bear goes over the mountain to see what he can see and all that he can see is the other side of the mountain. Adults and children embodied bears in all kinds of states; fast bears, slow bears, fierce bears shy bears, ambitious bears, resistant bears and more.....and in the centre of the room stood Leila, an assertive three year old with a fiery temper. Her body was expanded and open, her feet planted firmly

in the ground, securing a broad base with her arms stretched to the side. Her mother approached her, wanting to encourage her to move with the group, but Leila waved her on. Leila held a magnetic presence in her tiny body, creating a powerful space around her. I was intrigued as to state of her inner bear. I had reflected on how so many different bears were able to share the space, but somehow couldn't place Leila's bear.

'I wonder what it's like to be your bear, Leila?' I said.

She looked at me with indignation in her eyes, which told me in an instant that I'd got it wrong.

'I am *not* a bear' she said 'I am the *mountain*.'

She was a child who was rarely still and there was a way in which she had connected to a powerful resource inside her and channelled her vivacious and sometimes chaotic energy down into the centre of the earth. Other children joined her, wanting to experience the living rock inside them; other children, for whom stillness was entirely uncharacteristic, stood broad and firm, finding a silent strength of stillness within them. A few remaining bears continued on their journeys. All, it seemed, were exploring their ecological selves. They were discovering a connection with a living system greater than themselves. My sense was that Leila was not standing 'as if' she were a mountain; she *was* the mountain; it was an intrinsic part of her identity.

We are seen to develop a sense of self through our early interactions with significant carers in our lives. Developmental frameworks shape a process of merging and separation on our journey to an autonomous self within a human community. In a more expansive view of the self, we are at the same time defining ourselves within the context of a network of life on earth. Barrows (1995) cites models of child development within indigenous communities in which there is an emphasis on rituals which honour the bonding between the newborn child and the earth. This has a significant impact on the individual's identity. Barrows suggests that we are born with a natural affiliation with nature's flora and fauna which is evident in a child's sensory and physical delight in the world. This, she says, is not merely a symbolic attachment and has implications within therapeutic relationship.

'If we see the child inextricably connected not only to her family, but to all living things and to the earth itself, then our conception of her as an individual, and of the family and social systems in which she finds herself, must expand.' (Barrows 1995, p.107)

I remember how Adam taught me something of this expansive perception of the self. When I worked Adam, he was 10 years old and had been diagnosed with autism at an early age. Adam confounded those he encountered with his behaviour. His language was sensory and physical and his sensitivity to his environment appeared to be acute. Early on in our work together I offered his mother a space in order to explain what it is I do and to increase my understanding of Adam.

'I can't make any sense of his behaviour' said his mother, overwhelmed by the human vulnerability which Adam exposed in us.

'...and when it's a full moon he just goes bananas.' she added, almost as an aside.

Her words stayed with me as Adam and I began to build a relationship. Intrigued by her observation that Adam's moods were affected in this way, I tracked the waxing and waning of the moon to find that Adam displayed an acute sensitivity to lunar cycles. During one session there was a solar eclipse and at the time of the eclipse the intensity of the energy between us felt palpable. It seemed that in order to understand Adam's world I needed to make reference to a universal framework; I needed to include a world beyond our species within our relationship and to relate to his ecological self. Adam's relationship to the rhythms of the universe was an intrinsic part of his identity and to ignore this was to ignore a part of him. My perception of Adam needed to be inclusive.

Inclusive practice meets a universal need to belong and to be valued as part of a wider body of life; it concerns our respect for and responsibility to one another and presents the challenge of accommodating difference and find ways of sharing space without becoming destructive. If we identify on this deeper level with the diversity of life, then we begin to live through reciprocal relationships with each other and with the earth as our collective home. This stands in contrast to Western industrial cultural values, which involve individualism, autonomy, and anthropocentrism. Once we discover the ecological self within us, our context becomes one of connection and responsibility and this perspective can be located in a paradigm shift which moves away from '...the bounded, isolated self towards a vision of a self that is permeable, interconnected not only with other human selves but with a range of all living beings and processes...' (Barrows 1995 p. 103)

In meeting the challenge of accommodating and understanding diversity we see how issues of individual clients and groups reflect broader issues of how we live together. Sometimes I wonder how I can facilitate personal growth and wholeness in a world in which inequality and injustice are rife and within a human community which is destroying the very home on which it is dependent. This intricate web of relationships can be seen to have a profound impact on our identity; an identity which embraces our 'whole body-mind-spirit organism' in its entirety (Clinebell 1996, p.26). An inclusive approach finds the complexity of living relationships reflected in the complexity of the individual's inner world. It is a place where we learn to listen and to 'be' and in doing so become more receptive to the language of an ecosystem and the language of each other. As I explore my own position within the context of a living earth, so my concept of the self expands. This expanded concept of the human self allows me to open my perception of the client before me.

The Creative Arts Therapists are, by their very nature, concerned with the expression of an inner world which transcends words. Dance Movement Therapy leads us into the world of sensory perception, into a physical and spiritual expression through which our emotions flow. In DMT I'm using one of the things we all have in common, that is a body. This world of the body connects us as dynamic organisms to the diversity of a living world. Each of us has a

physical presence in this world; our bodies, minds and spirits are in a constant flow of change in response to stimuli from both outside and inside. This living flow identifies us at a deeper level to a wider body of life and to the earth itself and reference to an expanded concept of the self can transform the psychic framework within which we work.

The story that follows, '*Coming Down to Earth*', was inspired by a course facilitated by Dave Key and Mary-Jayne Rust (see www.footprintconsulting.org). The course took place on the west coast of Scotland, where a group of people shared the week together to explore the nature of ecotherapy. The central experience of the course was a day spent alone, from dawn to dusk, in the wilds of nature. As a Dance Movement Therapist, this took me to an authentic, embodied level of knowledge of the wider self. It became a journey from the rational, cognitive theory, into the primitive knowledge of body and soul.

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Coming Down to Earth

Once I heard the story of a woman. An ordinary woman from the city, who learned to listen to the breathing of the earth and found a universal home within herself.

One day, she packed her bag and headed north to a wild place.

Arriving at a coastal wilderness, her head demanded to know of her intention. She wandered across the beach in search of a purpose and, deep in thought, balanced on boulders, peering inquisitively through the giant, rounded stepping stones. The smooth curves of smaller rocks lay on still smaller stones, which harboured tiny glistening pebbles and spiralling shells. The woman balanced lightly, her walking boots nestling in a kaleidoscope of stone. Transferring her weight from one rock to the next, she sensed her desire to tread with care; to pursue her journey with the least disturbance to the rocky universe beneath her. At each step she righted her balance, suspended on a stretch of silence which reached into infinity beneath the urgent sound of the rushing waves. The sea splashed onto the rocks, clattering through shivering stones as it receded, tugging at succulent seaweed caught in small, jagged crevasses. The waves brushed against the waving tendrils of clinging sea anemones on their return to a fluid world where push dissolved into pull; where the upward swelling mountains of water shifted seamlessly into downward rolling slopes; where the muscle of the ocean contracted on a breath of intensity before releasing a burst of energetic free-flow; white foam splashing against the rocky shore.

The woman inhaled the vibrant sea air, which rushed in waves through her veins, tossing her body like flotsam across the shoreline as she surrendered to the energetic pull of the receding water. Flowing into the open sea, the woman was caught briefly in a vortex. She rippled through a wave, to be tossed back onto the shore like a wayward jellyfish.

Her rational mind sprung up from the beach and demanded an intention. She edged her way towards the waves, in search of reason.

‘What is my intention?’ the woman cried.

A wave lapped gently towards her before softly caressing the sand on its retreat.

‘.....we have no use for intentions....’ It whispered,

‘.....we dance with the rhythms of the earth and follow the wisdom of the moon; we rise and fall with the spirits of the sea and flow with the currents of universal time.....’

The next morning the woman rose before dawn. She left her cabin and headed along the coast, strongly drawn to rock and sea, intending to find a place to settle until dusk. She took a flask of water, clothes to keep her warm and a torch to guide her home. The woman sought a place to be with nothing but herself and the universe; a place to explore the nature of her existence. The sun began to rise and she followed a scent to find herself climbing a rock, pausing momentarily to watch a seal swimming in a bay. Continuing to climb, she found a small, raised plateau overlooking the ocean. She looked down through black, jagged rocks rising ominously from rock pools which lay cradled in the rounded boulders below. The sea lurched against the rocks, engulfing them in heavy green-grey water with a thundering roar of energy before retreating to expose shining-black, glistening stone.

With the length of the day stretching out ahead, the woman’s smaller self began to measure time. She had no watch and suddenly found herself in an empty, open space, with no distractions from the truth of her existence

She paced the plateau. Anxious thoughts paced the contours of her mind, pecking at the fragile shell of her smaller self.

How soon?	How long?
For what?	From where?
far?	How
	How many?
	How big?
How small?	How much?

Finding herself alone upon the rock, the woman spiralled like a hermit crab, tight inside a shell, which protected her from the vastness of the world. She paced in the skin of the small, isolated self, the self which creeps anxiously to man-made- measured time; the self which protects its own importance for fear of vanishing into oblivion.

The chill in the sea air brushed against the woman’s cheek and at that moment she caught sight of a sea otter pushing through the undulating water, as divergent ripples shone silver in its wake. The otter flipped effortlessly from one side to the other and then circled back the way she’d come. She caressed the water to cast a smooth silk circular trail behind her.

The gently billowing silver curves of water rose through the woman's body and the freedom of the sea otter rippled effortlessly through her spine. It reached into her shoulders and followed a momentum through her limbs. The woman broke free from the shell of measured time and surrendered to the rhythmic swell of the waves, reaching and pulling, filling and emptying as an elastic tension connected her to the vastness of the ocean and the mountainous curves of the rising land. Her body listened to the story of the earth. Rising and falling, floating and sinking, twisting and curving, a universe swirled inside her...

..and she danced.....

..... and she danced.....with her feet planted firmly in the earth.

She looked down through the jagged rocks at the boulders below and smelled the salty air. Light rain began to fall and individual drops sent circles dancing in the rock pools below. Thousands of raindrops danced brief circles in the surface tension, like crystal balls holding the stories of the future. Each emerged for a short transient moment and then vanished, to be replaced a hundred fold in an improvised cannon.

The rain stopped and the water in the rock pools smoothed into mirrors, reflecting scudding clouds. A gentle grey stillness drifted from the sky and the woman succumbed to an urge to sleep. With all intention lost, she curled into a nearby rock, which fitted around her like a glove. Her hip nestled into a concave space and her legs curled easily around its base. Her elbow and shoulder found a comfortable niche and a softly rounded pillow of smooth, yielding stone supported her head. She sank into the pliable rock, which moulded to the shape of her body like resistant clay.

Rain was falling again.

The woman closed her eyes and was rocked to sleep by a lullaby of rushing waves bursting open on the shore, of crying gulls circling overhead and of the continuous pattering of raindrops on her hood.

She felt herself sinking to the centre of the earth.

Time moved around as the earth slowly shifted its relationship to the sun, which lit the world from behind a veil of cloud.

Rain fell from the sky.

Waves crashed against the rocks.

Gulls screeched overhead.

The voluminous sea closed in over the rock pools and the sun began a slow descent towards the horizon.

Gradually the woman began to stir, conscious of a rumbling and a heaving from the rock on which she slept. The rock became her ribs, wrapping around her heart and gently breathing through her. It was as if she was being breathed by giant lungs as her body expanded and contracted in a synchronised duet with the earth. Had she exercised her will, she would have leapt from the rock and run a thousand miles away. But at that moment she had no will. She just was. She was the rhythm of the rock. She was the heart beat of the earth. She was a woman without intention. The meaning of her existence lay beyond the boundaries of her body, beyond the boundaries of her mind.

She lay suspended in a waking dreamtime and drifted into a vision of her future. Death dissolved her flesh; bare bones lying upon the rock in a stripped white simplicity. A giant wave washed the rock clean and her human remains carried with them the history of her ancestors. The bones shone white with centuries of joyous connections and deep felt love, with glories and triumphs since ancient times. Deep grooves were etched into the surface of her bones with tales of trauma, pain, guilt and shame from bloody wars and human injustices and untold destruction, reaching far into the past. Her remains were infused with simple acts of kindness and compassion from generations long gone. Her bare bones were sinking to the fathomless depths of the ocean; sinking down to begin a slow transformation to become the very rocks on which she'd slept.

All at once, the woman's rational mind demanded an explanation. A blanket of fear squeezed between her body and the rock which now rose hard and unyielding from the earth. A freezing wind rippled through her mind as she contemplated her experience, afraid that her ego had become flooded in a chasm of madness reaching deep into her body. The woman moved away, distancing herself from the dreamtime within the rock.

She scrambled up a grassy slope and sat a little higher up, glancing back at her jagged resting place. She sat in a timeless zone, hugging her knees, gently rocking and gazing out to sea. Her vision blurred with tears, she was caught in a crevasse between elation and fear. The woman felt a reconfiguration of her relationship with the earth.

The rain stopped and a break in the clouds freed a shaft of sunlight from the sky. It reached down to the sea and threw a beam of light across the water, stretching a silver pathway into the universe.

Gannets dropped from the sky, plunging head first into the sea. Cormorants skimmed the surface of the ocean and landed on a rock where they stretched their jet black wings elegantly in steely shafts of evening sunlight; primitive statuesque figures. Oyster catchers tore urgently across the bay with whooping cries and fast beating wings.

The light was dimming. The woman gathered her belongings and, following the coast, she headed back to where she was staying by the light of her torch. In a shroud of darkness, she hesitated before entering the cabin, reluctant to break the spell of the wider self, suspended

between two worlds. She entered the human realm with caution, clinging possessively to a profound sense of connection to the earth.

The next morning, she rose before dawn. The woman walked slowly up the muddy hill, now sodden from so much rain the previous day. She turned and stood high above the shoreline, watching as the earth shifted towards the dawn light. The black silhouettes of the landscape became awash with rich autumn colours as the world emerged in the yellow-orange hue of the gathering morning light. Stags whispered from the shadows.

She breathed the morning air and sighed from the centre of the earth. With the deep red mountains behind her, she stood on the top of the world gazing out into the visceral body of the universe. She contemplated her wider self which dances with the rhythms of the earth and follows the wisdom of the moon.....a self which rises and falls with the spirits of the sea and flows with the currents of universal time.....a self which breathes with the earth. She felt the transience of her human life in the waves as they crashed upon the shore in a rolling succession.

She listened for the silence, which stretched into infinity, beneath the urgent sound of rushing waves. The true silence of death as it sinks to the fathomless depths of the ocean as part of an ongoing universal dance.

The woman returned to the city, feeling closer to the truth of her existence. She stood on a crowded tube train, shoulder to shoulder with people of intention, strangely unperturbed by the madness of city life. She closed her eyes and smiled, remembering that beneath the disconnected urgency of the morning rush hour, lies a living, breathing earth.....

.....and within that earth lie riches beyond our wildest dreams.

Caroline Frizell frizarm@btinternet.com

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