

COSMIC WALK: AWAKENING THE ECOLOGICAL SELF

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Psychotherapy and Politics International Vol 1, No.1 2003

Abstract

In this article I introduce the emerging field of Ecopsychology, one strand within the 'cognitive, spiritual and perceptual revolution' that is part of our possible transition to a sustainable and just global society. I begin with the 'deep time' practice of telling some of the 15 billion year story of our universe, setting the largest possible context for asking the question 'what are we doing?' to the rest of life on this planet, and to ourselves. Having indicated that this is a time of considerable crisis and opportunity for transformation, I begin to explore the reuniting of psychology with ecology, psyche with earth, human with 'nature', science with humanities. This 'split' is understood to be pivotal in our currently unsustainable mode of living, and is explored further as a denied but deeply dysfunctional relationship. I explore this relationship as analogous to relationships of oppression between humans, developing the concept of 'anthropocentrism', and indicating parallels in both structure and content of, for example, sexism and racism with human dominance over all other forms of life. 'Despair and empowerment' work is then discussed, as it is found that psychic numbing, or otherwise great emotional pain may be present when there is support and validation for addressing our feelings about the devastation of our planet. Other models of the 'psychopathology of the human/nature relationship', such as thinking around trauma, addiction and deficit/developmental derailment are also briefly discussed, along with some solution-focussed initiatives. The value of diagnoses from outside of the modern mindset is indicated, alongside linking the tearing of people from their land with the destruction of cultures, and the potential for unaware racism in a field that has grown up in the dominant culture. Finally I discuss aspects of 'shadow and light' in the situation in which we find ourselves, aspects of 'resistance', or the ways we find ourselves entrapped in reproducing what we may want to change, and lastly I sketch some of the wide range of ecopsychological initiatives currently taking place on the ground, and invite my readers to add to these.

The crucible that is Now

“Mystery generates wonder and wonder generates awe.

The gasp can terrify, or the gasp can emancipate,

Today we take a glimpse at the beauty of the story, something of its deep mystery. It is the story of the universe, and story of Earth, the story of the human, the story of you and me....”

So begins the rather beautiful, and often deeply moving, ‘deep time’ ritual known as the ‘Cosmic Walk’. The youngest participant walks, or slowly dances, their way out from the centre of a spiral representing the (can you hear this?) **15 billion years** of our evolutionary history. As each development is shared, to the sounds of drums, and often spontaneous whoops of applause, s/he lights another candle placed however many more billions or millions or thousands of years on, around the spiral, until finally it is alight all the way out from the centre to the present, a beautiful cosmic snail shell.

Some moments from along the way:

*“From the void, from the dark, came the light and the spark. Some 15 billion years ago, a great ball of fire expanded outwards into the creation of the Universe; **space and time, shadows and light.....***

*A billion years later, **Galaxies** come forth. **Stars** are born, live, and die. Larger stars, in their death throes, explode and become supernovas.....*

*As they blast out into the cosmos, Supernovas create in their wombs the **elements** of life.....*

*4.5 billion years ago, our Grandmother star becomes a supernova. She gives up her life in an explosion that gives rise to our star, what we call the sun. Our **Solar System** forms.....*

*...**The moon** is born when Earth is impacted by a mars sized body that causes the earth to tilt to the side, giving rise to **the seasons of the year.***

*...As steam condenses, **the first rains** fall....*

*4 billion years ago, the **first living cells!***

*3.9 billion years ago, bacteria run out of free food supplies. They invent ways to **capture energy from the sun...***

In the process, however, they give off oxygen, a deadly corrosive gas that eventually..threatens life...

*...2 billion years ago, oxygen loving cells emerge. **The first global environmental crisis is averted** by the creativity of these tiny cellular creatures who invent a use for oxygen as they breath it in and use its energy...*

*...Individual bacteria learn **to cooperate and specialize** within giant cell cooperatives...These types of **organisms** are the same stuff of all plants and animals today...*

*1billion years ago organisms begin **to eat each other** in the predator-prey dance..*

*600 million years ago, light sensitive eyespots evolve into **eyesight**. The earth sees herself for the first time...*

*460 million years ago – leaving the water, animals such as worms and molluscs seek the adventure of **breathing air**....*

*The **first plants** evolve as mosses...*

*Insects evolve as the **first flying animals**...*

*335 million years ago, the the **first forests** evolve*

*...The great age of **reptiles** begins*

*Dinosaurs develop a behavioural novelty unknown previously in the reptilian world – **parental care!***

*150 million years ago, **birds** emerge...Far larger than todays birds, wing spans are as large as 12 meters...*

*114 million years ago, plants evolve gorgeous and overt sexual organs, making themselves irresistible to insects...The earth adorns herself magnificently...**Flowers!***

*65 million years ago the **5th mass extinction**...This marks the end of the age of the dinosaurs...the once dark and sheltered small mammals move in quickly to occupy available ecological niches...*

Over the next 60 million years the earth greets rodents, whales, monkeys, horses, grazing animals, bears, pigs and the first humans..

...100 thousand years ago modern humans emerge... (1.)

What an extraordinary creation story, what a heritage. If we are awake to it, surely we must want to honour the development of the web of life from which we emerge, in which we have our being, and on which we are utterly dependant.

And yet, as we all know, in the last few hundred years - an infinitesimal pinprick of time - humans, (primarily of the 'industrial growth society' initiated in the northern and western world), have had a hugely destructive impact on life on this planet, affecting the atmosphere, polluting right through the oceans, erasing ancient forests, causing flooding and planetary warming, and a rising tide of extinctions of other species. We are in the process of enacting the 'sixth major extinction wave'.

What are we doing?

As has apparently happened many times before in the development of our universe, yet another crucible of crisis, pressure, destruction – and the potential for a hugely creative solution - has appeared; on this planet, in our solar system and galaxy, in our lifetimes right here, right now. It seems that it is our species, our behaviour, our ways of organising ourselves, the level of our collective and individual consciousness, that are directly implicated.

Will we emerge from this crisis, in due course, having transformed – or at least moderated in 'good enough' way – our collective ecocidal behaviour, our addiction to material consumption and economic growth, which means plundering our beautiful planet to make things out of it, and shortly returning it to itself in the form of mountains of 'trash'? Will we have stopped pursuing the unsustainable goal of getting materially richer, which means richer than other people, thus creating a world culture of complacency and resentment, envy and brutality, inequality and war, refugee camp and 'immigration policy'; greed, poverty and the hardening of hearts?

Will we emerge somehow having learned the hard lessons of our destructive mode of living? To a time, perhaps, of cooperating in earth restoration work, of working towards a sustainable and just mode of economics, where the growth and 'highs' we seek have more to do, once again, with the mystery and awe of our cosmos, with loving relationship, intimacy, and the joy of participation in the creation of a life- rather than profit-centred human world? A time of learning humbly and skilfully to cooperate with the 'forces of nature' (including our own), of ecological and compassionate spirituality, all kinds of creativity, and the healing of our inherited psychic wounds, of finally learning to live diversity ...for example? Will we indeed! In fact will we emerge with a creative and sustainable

resolution, or will most or all of us, quite probably, not emerge? And if we do not change what we are doing, how much destruction will we wreak, how badly will we pollute the planet, how many species will we take with us?

This situation is surely very hard to live with;

“Until the late 20th century, every generation throughout history lived with the tacit certainty that there would be generations to follow. Each assumed, without questioning, that its children and children’s children would walk the same earth, under the same sky. Hardships, failures and personal death were encompassed in the vaster assurance of continuity. That certainty is now lost to us, whatever our politics. That loss, unmeasured and unmeasurable, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time”.(my stress)(2.)(p 241)

The Great Turning and the Emergence of Ecopsychology

Thomas Berry terms the transformation that is called for ‘The Great Work’. He writes

“The Great Work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilisation from its present devastating influence on the Earth to a more benign mode of presence, is not a role we have chosen. It is a role given to us....We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historical task.....Our own special role, which we will hand on to our children, is that of managing the arduous transition from the terminal Cenozoic (the last 67 million years) to the emerging Ecozoic Era, the period when humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive earth community. This is our great work and the work of our children...” (3) (p 7,8)

In her book ‘Coming Back to Life’(4) Joanna Macy calls this ‘The Great Turning’. She identifies three major aspects within this: holding actions at all levels in defence of life on earth; analysis of structural causes of what is happening and the creation of alternative ways, and thirdly, consciousness work; the shift in the ways we construe the world, ourselves, and how we want to live, a ‘cognitive, spiritual and perceptual revolution’. She

locates Ecopsychology in the third stream, alongside deep ecology, ecofeminism, engaged Buddhism, Creation Spirituality, and general living systems theory, amongst other things.

One strand within that 'cognitive spiritual and perceptual revolution', Ecopsychology arises, in essence, from a coming together of environmentalism with the plurality of ways people are currently contemplating the human psyche and its processes. These include the multiple streams of psychotherapy, psychology and counselling, with their varying views on who we are, how we are influenced by, and in turn influence, our 'environments', and how we change, or grow, or heal, or transform dysfunctional/addictive/destructive modes of life' - including the practice of radical acceptance of what is.

What, then, transpires when we try to bring ecology and psychology back together?

My first answer is that for many people there is a powerful 'aha!' moment, excitement and indeed passion quickly following. It is as though there is a great release of both energy and insight from the re-connection. Suddenly it seems obvious; James Hillman wrote

'Sometimes I wonder...how psychology ever got so off base. How did it cut itself off from reality? Where else in the world would a human soul be so divorced from the spirits of its surroundings?..Psychology, so dedicated to awakening the human consciousness, needs to wake itself up to one of the most ancient truths; we cannot be studied or cured apart from the planet'

(5) (pxxii)

Equally, very general insights about the nature and context of the split, as well as its consequences, quickly emerge as soon as a broader 'bridging' stance is taken. For example, the recognition that the separation of psyche from ecology parallels the separation of 'mind' from 'matter', of 'science' ('objective', out there, the nonhuman world that humans analyse, control and dominate) from 'humanities' ('subjective', in here, the world of the human relating to other humans, the world that may include feeling, compassion, communion). It can then be seen that this underlying split has allowed *both* the extraordinary technological

and industrial achievements of the last half millennium, *and* the craziness of our destruction of the biosphere as though it were separate from us.

I have suggested that bringing together of psychology and ecology is potent partly because their separation reflects, and in a way represents, the larger split, or disconnection on which the whole situation arguably hinges – the ‘modern’ conception that humans are separate from the rest of life. (And this in turn seems to echo the spiritual journey towards oneness that is at the heart of the great mystery traditions). As well as immediate flashes of insight, what arises when we try to put the two back together, also often includes an attempt to understand more of what is going on in this disconnection, this apparently ‘non’ relationship.

It has been something of a psychotherapeutic truism since Freud, that that of which we are unaware, that which is ignored, or out of sight, or repressed, is often paradoxically that which is exercising most control, and often in a destructive way. This seems to be true of our denied relationship with ‘nature’; whilst we pretend it is not there and refuse to pay attention, we do not consciously really recognise that there is a problem, and so we continue in what we are doing. However when we do look at what is going on in that relationship, and particularly at the dysfunctional aspects, we firstly see that there is a, rather large, problem, secondly we start to feel the intense emotional distress that is otherwise avoided, and thirdly our way is opened to addressing the situation – to working towards a solution.

Human Chauvinism

One insight that has arisen from the attempt to understand more about the split – or more about the denied relationship between the modern human and ‘nature’- has been that this relationship has much in common with oppressive aspects of relationships between groups of humans. The massively pervasive mindset, which we seem to live out in our every institution, that humans are separate from, *but also superior to*, everything else, has been termed ‘anthropocentrism’ by deep ecologist John Seed:

“Anthropocentrism’, or ‘homocentrism’ ,means human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute ‘human race’ for ‘man’ and ‘all other species’ for ‘woman’. Human chauvinism, the idea that humans are the crown of creation, the source of all value, the measure of all things, is deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness.

“And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth on the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands they are delivered.” (Genesis 9.2.) “ (6)(p35)

I find the concept of anthropocentrism hugely helpful. Sexism is something that many of us are relatively familiar with; for all but biological fundamentalists, it implies not an inevitable relationship between men and women, but one in which things have gone awry; specifically, there is power involved, and inequality. Patriarchy, in common with class and racism, is an *oppressive* relationship; this includes the economic inequality or exploitation of one group by the other, and violence predominantly inflicted by the more powerful group on the less powerful to keep this in place. It also includes an ideology which justifies this situation largely through statements of the innate superiority of the more powerful group, which makes their dominance both inevitable and desirable for all concerned, a devaluing of attributes or alleged attributes of the oppressed group versus those of the oppressor, an emotional brutalisation or desensitisation of the oppressor essential for this behaviour, and an invalidation of the significance of the oppressed group, including a *denial of the dependence of the oppressor group on the other*. Obviously these things are not true of every interaction between members of these groups, but they are, I think, broadly true of oppressive aspects, where they exist, of relationships between these groups as a whole.

These elements are also discernable in the destructive aspect of how our species – in the dominant culture of the ‘industrial growth society’ – is treating other species and elements with whom we share the planet. The ‘others’ are of course there to be economically exploited as ‘resources’ – these words are openly used most days on any national news broadcast, for example. The violence is considerable, from factory farming to animal experimentation, from the destruction of forests to the decimation of marine life. Humans are apparently so self evidently superior that all of the rest of life is assumed to be only and entirely here to serve us – the possibility that it may be of intrinsic value in its own right is

laughable. And significantly, in our arrogance we fail to know that we are dependant on the devalued other – the rich and glorious life of this planet. So great is our arrogance and brutalisation, so unaware are we of how we depend on the trees of this planet in order to breath, as well as for the water cycling from earth to heaven and back down as rain, as well as for the creation of the very soil on which our crops grow - that we even put our precious selves at terrible risk as we cut them down.

The parallels are not only in the structure of the thing, but there are overlaps in content as well; women, black people, peasants, working people and children are all seen as closer to nature, and 'simpler'; further from the 'civilised' male ideal, and thus to be tamed and controlled in similar ways. They/we are seen as more 'instinctual' – their/our animal nature is more in evidence – and whilst this is perhaps envied and lusted after, it is also often repudiated and persecuted, both in the 'other' and in the 'civilised' male 'self'. (Aggression, too, is not something our culture is good at owning, but also tends to be projected both onto the clearly dominated other (women excepted) and onto the opposition in military conflict, and thus legitimately 'defended against'(sic.) And whilst these qualities are not acceptable for the self, they will continue to be longed for and persecuted simultaneously.

Of course in any oppressive situation the opposite pole is also usually present – a romanticisation and idealisation of the female, the 'noble savage', the working class hero, and in this case, of 'nature'. Our longings for our own lost wildness, for the disappearing wilderness, our delight in the existence of every wild critter that ever was, - these appear ever more urgently in our cultures' current myths. They are also exploited in practically every car advertisement, and in the burgeoning tourist industry as people from the rich world attempt momentarily to escape to the parts of the world we/they have not yet 'spoilt' – yes, they are sold as 'unspoilt!' We seem so near and yet so far from knowing what we are doing.

Despair and Empowerment

When psychology and ecology come back together, I claimed earlier, there is often a release of insight and understanding, passion and excitement. However as reconnection takes place, as we look at the whole picture, and move to explore the state of the hitherto denied relationship between humans and all else, great emotional pain is often found to be present.

It is, it seems, hugely hard to be alive in this planet time, knowing, dimly or more clearly, the extent of the destruction, and the depths of the peril.

Joanna Macy writes:

When we're distracted and fearful, and the odds are running against us, it's easy to let the heart and mind go numb. The dangers now facing us are so pervasive and yet often so hard to see – and painful to see when we manage to look at them – that this numbing touches us all. No-one is unaffected by it. No-one is immune to doubt, denial, or disbelief about the severity of our situation – and about our power to change it....

In systems terms, response to danger is a function of feedback...Appropriate response depends on an unblocked feedback loop. Yet...the perils facing life on earth are so massive and unprecedented that they are hard to believe. The very danger signals that should rivet our attention, summon up the blood, and bond us in collective action, tend to have the opposite effect. They make us want to pull down the blinds, and busy ourselves with other things.

...It is good to look at what this apathy is, to understand it with respect and compassion. Apatheia means, literally, non-suffering...apathy is the inability or refusal to feel pain. What is the pain we feel – and desperately try not to feel – in this planet time? It is pain for the world..... It is the pain of the world itself, experienced in each of us.....

That pain in the price of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world..” (7)(p 23 – 26)

Joanna and her colleagues have become experts at developing workshops in which there is permission, and it is safe and supported, to feel any pain that arises around what is happening on our planet. 'Pain for the world' is validated as a normal and appropriate response to what is happening – not treated as inevitably and exclusively a projection of a 'personal issue' – the anthropocentric and depoliticised stance that unfortunately so many therapists still take. And when permission and a safe workshop space are there, it seems

that there is boundless grief at what we are losing, 'over there' in the rainforests, and right here as many of us remember the world in which we grew up, and how much of it is now under concrete, the birds that no longer sing, the foxes at the bottom of the garden, the big tree that was cut down – that was always treated in years of therapy as being about that persons relationship with – not the tree, or trees, but with her father! How can we free ourselves up to be awake and to act appropriately when there is no place for our grief? Again, there is terrific fear for the future, rage, powerlessness, guilt, and confusion.

What has been consistently found in such workshops – as most therapists would predict were they to accept the initial premise that the world is not only a cipher for our internal preoccupations – is that as we allow ourselves to feel again, as we reconnect with our world in this way – we feel connected again! Alongside the despair, there tends to arise a great sense of love, solidarity and community between the people involved, and the sense of being a bit more part of, and a bit more in love with, the great web of life. What also follows is 'empowerment' – a feeling of wanting to do what we can, and from a place of love and connection; to take our part in 'The Great Turning'.

Despair and empowerment workshops, deep ecology workshops, Joanna now uses the term 'The work that Reconnects' (op.cit) – are one particularly elegantly conceived set of practices for doing this healing work. This kind of process is in fact the bread and butter of much good therapy; it has simply been extended to embrace the world, in group process. We psychotherapists and counsellors, of all people, might be expected to know that its generally important actually to address what's happening, not to shy away from what is painful particularly if its causing a problem, to honour and support relationship as the stuff out of which the human psyche is woven; to allow back in what is crucially being left out, to have permission to 'affectively process', to trust the organismic wisdom here – and then to find dysfunctional behaviour and irrational thinking begin to shift in the direction of clarity and pro life choices. In my experience, that process is hugely amplified and enriched once we come out of the greatest denial of all, and come back home to earth.

David Abrams writes:

"Humans are tuned for relationship....This landscape of shadowed voices, these feathered bodies and antlers and tumbling streams – these breathing shapes are our

family, the beings with whom we suffer and struggle and celebrate. For the largest part of our species existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of our sensuous surroundings...from all of these relationships our collective sensibilities were nourished...The simple premise ... is that we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human' (8)(p ix)

Psychopathology? – And solutions.

The field is of course creatively seething with other attempts to understand more fully the 'psychopathology of the human/nature relationship', and the process of transformation thus indicated.

In her brilliant study of 'Trauma and Recovery; from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror', Judith Herman (9) describes the history of our understanding of trauma as one laced with 'episodic amnesia', as we collectively move between the conflicting needs for the 'unspeakable' to remain hidden and secret, and for its truth to be expressed. When the truth cannot be expressed directly, it often tells its story in the disguised form of the 'symptom'. She discusses the acceptability, or otherwise, of the experiences of sexual abuse and of 'shell shock', or the trauma of war, to be told, validated, and eventually recovered from. In the time of Freud women's experiences of sexual abuse began to surface, but the social climate forced these stories back underground and the women were instead pathologised, until in the context of the modern women's liberation movement they could again be told, but this time believed and worked with. Similarly the 'shell shock' of the first world war began to tell us a great deal about the true nature of war – but disappeared as a story until the anti-war movement in the USA gave the social support for Vietnam Vets to organise and tell of their experience in its emotional and traumatic fullness.

I suspect this analysis has a great deal to say about why our newspapers and therapists offices are not (yet) full of stories of inchoate anguish about the devastation of our planetary home. In the absence of sufficient social validation that anything is amiss, the experience of dislocation from the earth cannot easily be felt or articulated. Herman describes here the crucial role of peer support – the consciousness raising (c.r.) groups of the women's liberation movement, and the 'rap' groups of the Vietnam Vets. I am not the first to wonder

if we are about to witness an eruption of 'green c.r. groups' – perhaps already coming into existence in a diverse mix of forms.

Amongst those to write about the situation in terms of trauma, and also addiction theory, is Chellis Glendenning, who organises her analysis around 'technology' and addiction to technology (10,11). Albert La Chance wrote a '12 step' manual (12) for withdrawal from ecological destructiveness, and ecological healing, whilst others such as Durning (13), Kanner and Gomes (14) focus on material consumption as the central addictive process. Mary Jayne Rust (personal communication) talks of the west as involved in a 'giant eating disorder' whilst Ralph Metzner (15) discusses the relevance of our understanding of 'dissociation' and 'splitting' to the broad situation.

An analysis based more on 'developmental' or 'deficit' thinking is Paul Shepards' famous study of 'Nature and Madness' (16,17) in which he posits an 'ontogenetic crippling' of us all since the time of domestication and agriculture, when the developmental pathways of an intimate, wild tribal childhood which had evolved through countless generations and to which we are thus 'hardwired', became massively and tragically derailed. He suggests that the culture as a whole fails to grow up properly, and is thus collectively and chronically immature, behaving with the alleged destructiveness and regression of the 'mentally ill', the alleged fantasies of omnipotence, oral preoccupation and dependence of the infant, and the narcissism, ambivalence and inconstancy of the adolescent.

Much developing ecopsychological practice could be thought of as 'solution focussed' – going directly for reconnection with 'all that is' in the present – from Laura Sewells' study of 'The Ecopsychology of Perception' (18), to the practices of 'wilderness work' and vision quests and rites of passage in the wild as we attempt to re-engage with some of the ancient practices of maturation. Horticultural therapists have long known of the healing that arises from being close to plants, although the low status of plants has been reflected in the low status of the 'patients' these therapists get to work with; now this tradition is being extended to work with, for example, refugees and torture survivors on allotments, or the creation of gardens in prisons. Shapiro (19) writes beautifully of the marriage of ecological restoration work with the restoration of the human community and the healing of souls. In my personal experience, the combination of group ecological restoration work with emotional work such as deep ecology sharing practices has been the most potent, healing

and exciting form. As 12 step theory would predict, healing goes well when it includes the work of making amends.

How did we get disconnected? Being torn from the land.

There are many stories currently being told about how our disconnected state came about – from the development of agriculture as Shepard suggests, to the invention of the written word, to the intellectual and social events that preceded, and were involved in, the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism. Hartmann (8) writes of the development of the ‘younger cultures’ that have succeeded and largely wiped out, the ‘older cultures’ that did live sustainably. I shall not attempt to answer this rather daunting question. However I find diagnoses from outside of our ‘younger culture’ situation, - from ‘older cultures’- enlightening and helpful. (See also Helena Norberg Hodge’s description of the emotionally and ecologically healthy Ladakhi culture as it came into contact with the west (21), and Malidoma Some’s work in bridging the spiritual riches of his Dagara people of west Africa with the white empire with which he and it collided, and thus leading western men in rituals of grief and the passage into manhood (22).

One of these is from Okanagan writer, Jeanette Armstrong, who tells of standing on a beautiful wild hillside, with her father and grandmother, looking down at the smoking chimneys, the blazing motorways and the crawling traffic of the white man’s world below. Her grandmother comments that the

‘people down there are dangerous, they are all insane.’

And her father replies

‘It is because they are wild and scatter anywhere.’

She goes on to elaborate how meanings are woven together in the Okanagan language, and thus translates her grandmothers’ words as

‘The ones below, who are not of us (as place) may be a chaotic threat in action; they are all self-absorbed, arguing inside each of their heads’

and her fathers explanation of the reason for this as

Their actions have a source, they have a displacement panic, they have been pulled apart from themselves as family (generational sense) and as place (as land/us/survival)(23)(p 317)

(my stress). And the Okanagans know that what they themselves fear worst of all, is to be torn from their land (which as we know, is precisely what the white invader did to those native Americans he did not kill directly) – clearly, this can make you dangerous and insane.

I find this to be a sophisticated and apt diagnosis. The incomers had of course left Europe, and before that there had been huge upheavals through industrialisation, enclosures and pogroms, at the least. The displaced became displacers, simultaneously tearing millions more from their land, in the African slave trade.

As it is within this ‘insane’ dominant culture that Ecopsychology, one attempt to reconnect, has arisen, it runs the clear risk of unaware racism; being full of the stories of the dominant culture, and less full of the stories of those for whom disconnection from the land is a lived experience perhaps in this lifetime, one that was enforced brutally, as Carl Anthony has pointed out (24). I agree that the issues are inseparable, and that it is an unacceptable mistake for environmentalists or ecopsychologists from the dominant culture to talk about environmental destruction without talking about the multiple destruction of human cultures that has taken place at the same time. Compare these two voices;

The first is from Ghanain African poet Ellis Ayitey Komey.

The Damage you have done.

(‘You’ in this poem clearly refers to the European invader.)

“When I see blood pouring down the valleys,

Mahoganies trembling with fear

And palms drooping with disease,

I know you cannot stay with me

*Nor hold a light across the land,
The damage you have done....”*

(25)(p 221)

The second is from American poet Anita Barrows, ‘You’ in this poem, is, I think, ... any other human. The damage has been done by – ‘us’.

*“And I would travel with you
To the places of our shame*

*The hills stripped of trees, the marsh grasses
Oil-slicked, steeped in sewage;*

The blackened shoreline, the chemical poisoned water.....

*...I would put my hand
there with yours, I would take your hand, I would walk with you*

*through carefully planted fields, rows of leafy vegetables
drifting with radioactive dust;through the dark
of uranium mines hidden in the sacred gold-red mountains...” (26)(p 38)*

They are talking about the same thing; they are not talking from the same perspective.

Shadow and Light in the Process of Transformation

The central insight of Ecopsychology is perhaps that where there is pain in our pseudo ‘disconnection’ from our world and each other, there also lies the possibility of reconnection, healing, and hope. (‘Disconnection’ is, of course, a paradox, rather like the paradox ‘I am not myself’. How can we be disconnected from the earth in which we dwell, how can we not be ourselves – and yet it seems also to have meaning that we can become more ourselves, and we can ‘reconnect’ with our world).

In concluding 'the Truth Mandala', a ritual from Macy's 'work that reconnects', we note the two sides of what we are doing; our anger, far from negative when safely expressed in this way, is in fact our 'passion for justice'. Our grief and tears for what is being lost is precisely a measure of how much we can and do love these beloved things, beloved beings. Our fear is in fact our humbling knowledge of our limits, and of our vulnerability, and so is a trustworthy ally in recognising danger and taking action. The depths of our despair plumbs our deep sense of what could be, our capacity for hope and vision. And the emptiness of not knowing anything anymore – is the empty space into which the new may be born.

For me as a psychotherapist, this is a lived reality, not an intellectual belief. The potential for transformation is of course implicit in all aspects of the trouble we are in. A year ago I facilitated an exercise in which people explored personal, or close, experiences of addiction – what was being sought, what the substance symbolised or represented, what was being avoided, what did people not want to feel; what it felt like to use whatever it was, what made it hard to stop, and what happened when they did stop. We then went on to explore how well (or otherwise) this picture mapped itself onto the larger picture of the material consumption that our profit based social organisation 'pushes'. It became extraordinarily moving, I found, initially because the mapping was so perfect – peoples inner worlds informed us that just the same processes were involved.

It also emerged that what was both being sought, (and also avoided), was eminently sustainable; and tended to be the very things I talked about at the beginning of this article, in sketching what might be involved in a creative solution to our situation. People did what they did in order to feel intimacy, to feel they belonged, that they were free, sexy, for spiritual highs and bliss, to dispel insecurity/feel safe in the world and feel confident in themselves, to make the pain go away, to feel personally powerful, to be more creative, to have more energy. The 'bad' news is that going for it in the wrong place, by a short cut, leaves the 'hole inside', because the need is still not met, and we've got a bit further away from actually meeting it – so we do a bit more of the same thing to feel better. The good news is that what it seems we really want is eminently sustainable after all!

The mapping of differently oppressive social relationships onto our relationship with the earth is at first sight very depressing. These habits of dominance and abuse seem deeply

embedded in our psyches, and in a devastatingly destructive interlocked global economic situation. The opportunity inherent in the situation is, I think, that as the planet warms, flooding and desertification speed up, wars over oil and water are spawned, and the human population heads towards 10 billion – we are increasingly confronted with the limits, the pointlessness, of what we are doing. It becomes ever more apparent that the earth is finite, that we are interconnected at every level, and that we collectively face a shared challenge of learning together how to undo our habits of arrogance and oppression. We get to unite and co-operate, to ‘wake up’ or ‘grow up’ – or the future becomes unbelievably bleak.

The water in which we swim: resistance

A challenge I have found in my ecopsychological endeavours, is that I, and practically everyone I have ever met, have been raised and continue to live in a world in which the ‘split’ is the consensual, institutionalised and lived, reality. Inevitably we find we reproduce it despite ourselves. Noticing how we do that is often highly informative.

To start with, our language is of itself, anthropocentric. The greatest difficulty is that it opposes ‘human’ to ‘nature’ – and everyone tends to use ‘nature’ to mean the non-human, non-built environment – people talk of reconnecting with nature, of spending time in nature. And in doing so, we implicitly reaffirm that the human world is not part of nature.

One quite common response to the situation is reversal; humans are bad, the rest of nature is better, so not to worry, it’ll be alright when we have gone because basically we are a bad lot. Whilst supposedly facing the problem, humans in this story continue to be separate and different from the rest of life, and we continue not to have to face what we are doing. In the world of therapy, this is the equivalent of reacting to bad experiences of authority by becoming a compulsive rebel, or any number of other ways of simply inverting a pattern rather than confronting, assimilating and growing through it. I find it intellectually emotionally and spiritually unsatisfying, though limitedly comforting. We are part of life; we have emerged out of the same processes as all else, and whether or not we like it or are prepared to take responsibility, right now the cutting edge of life on our planet (and apparently for quite a distance) *is* the state of our consciousness, the level, in effect of our spiritual evolution. How can we not at least try?

Another, and I believe very significant, way that we can end up reproducing the split and thus disempowering ourselves, arises from the individualistic habit of thought that tells us that we 'ought' to be able to change the world, or live in an environmentally pure way, *on our own*; precisely reaffirming our separation just as we try to end it. The logical conclusion to the attempt for 'purity' is an isolated life as a fruitarian on an island – which can then lead to a sense of isolation and powerlessness – the nagging feeling that we are still, somehow, not doing enough to change things! The mistake lies, I think, in believing we can somehow separate ourselves from the global situation. I have frequently observed that people feel so implicated, that they decide that there is no point in even trying – 'I like my big car, and so do most people, so what's the point?'

A friend of mine talks about the 'but you're wearing leather boots' syndrome. Despite his life teaching permaculture, living all year round in a yurt, growing his own garden and his own tree nursery, planting trees, and running deep ecology workshops, someone had attacked him for wearing leather boots, and running a van with diesel – of which he was only too aware! In fact, of course, we are not separate, we are all part of the global situation, and so we are all either very isolated, or we are implicated in any number of ways. We each make different choices as to where and how we compromise, and which efforts we will try to make to live ethically or to build change – as activists, in main-stream politics, in peace or justice work, in recycling or kindness or prayer, through meditation or gardening or writing or loving our children – and none of us do it all. The crucial thing, I believe, is to learn to stop judging ourselves or each other for the limits of what we are each able to achieve, the choices that are different to our own, and to stop, in effect, hurting each other or ourselves with our own private pain about our world. We face the choice of weakening each others efforts by pointing out how limited they are – or of supporting and encouraging the positive flame that we can see – creating a synergy of hope and energy, rather than a mutual battering into feeling inadequate and useless.

Ecopsychology in Practice: landing at last!

I have, thus far, chosen to write of the coming together of ecology and psychology somewhat as though they were disembodied forces, hovering in the ether, and coming together somehow in the structure of collective consciousness. Perhaps this is because I

have some of the psychic attributes associated with birds of prey – flying up to see the big picture, starting a venture by needing to scan the contours of the land, start with the broad context, probe the underlying structure of things.

For those of my readers whose nature is to start with detail and work up, this is probably infuriating. I hope that as differing psychic species we can get along, respecting and pooling our different gifts rather than battling over whose way of being is the right one!

There are many people all over the world working to confront the global challenges we face, ecologically, politically, psychologically, and spiritually. Ecopsychology is one stream within this that arises ‘in the belly of the monster’ and much that people have tried to do has taken place in the USA, in the last 30 years, and primarily in the last 15. I am personally most aware also of the UK Ecopsychology movement, which now includes local groups, a national network, and an increasing number of events, workshops, courses, and activists.

Different initiatives include;

- Taking people into wilderness situations, following such practices as ‘vision quests’, as ways of healing, transformation, and reconnection (27,28). Includes taking youth in trouble with the law, examples in USA and South Africa.
- Research showing the positive psychological or health effects (eg rates of recovery from surgery) of, for example, having a pet, or a ‘green view’ from a hospital window (29)
- Reviewing the theoretical bases of the three main traditions; cognitive behavioural, psychodynamic and humanistic/transpersonal, from an earth-centred perspective (30) and (31) work to build theoretical and academic clarity and shape to the field.
- Practices for group and individual work eg ‘telling your earth story’ (32), deep ecology practices (refs 4 and 6), Sarah Conn’s ‘Soul tracking in nature’
- Research into childhood experiences as they relate to adult environmental attitudes, Clinebell (32) on ‘ecobonding’, ‘ecoalienation’ and ‘nature’ as facilitating (or otherwise) environment. Clinebell’s theory of personality development.
- Jungians exploring the ‘ecological collective unconscious’ and Jung’s work in this light.(33)
- Gestaltists exploring field theory in this light, (34) and ‘armouring’ against experiencing our presence in ‘nature’.(35)

- Ecotherapy; including your relationship with the greater than human world in assessment sessions; treating it as a legitimate topic for major therapeutic work; having sessions outdoors, listening to dreams, symptoms and the unconscious through this frame also.
- Work from the field of addictions – mapping these learnings onto the consumer culture, and taking action. (refs 13 and 14).
- Dream work that is focussed on the earth; what may be being expressed through us, wanting to come into being through us
- Many attempts to revision the whole practice of therapy and counselling in the light of the times we are in – perhaps more like the shaman who mediates between the human world and the greater world, and works to address overall imbalances here. Or more like the midwife, involved in much broader support for the huge process of death and possible re-birth that we are going into.
- Projects challenging the confinement of people of colour to urban areas – coming back out!
- Ecopsychology courses being developed at undergraduate and masters levels.
- Work with refugees and asylum seekers, growing things, and simultaneously doing psychotherapy, on allotments.
- Reflection on the deep meaning of humans being ill with, and recovering from, ‘environmental illness’.(36)
- Bringing ecological spirituality into transpersonal therapy.

This list is of course not exhaustive. I hope some of you find it as exciting and tantalising as I do.

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But perhaps the key reason I have written mostly about the general shape of things, and only briefly about recent initiatives, is that the field is wide open, and crying out for the creative endeavours of each one of us, and it is to that ‘fertile void’ that I most wish to speak.

I believe that as there are any number of ways in which, as the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nath Hanh famously suggests we must try to do, we can

'hear within ourselves the sound of the earth crying',

There are also any number of ways in which we may find ourselves called to respond to this cry. If we do, individually and therefore collectively, respond, then of course we can turn the thing around – the question is ultimately one of motivation, of decision, of trying, a step at a time. I don't believe any of us have yet dreamt of what role the tribe of listeners, the counsellors and psychotherapists, could play if we were fully to take our power, and rise to meet the challenge, and play our role in the 'Great Turning'.

Hilary Prentice

June/September 2002

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