

people can and do say "Now I know what nature gave birth to me to do. Now I see what personal qualities are mine to bring into the world, what form of service is truly mine, what work will be the most fulfilling for me to perform – my soulwork."

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The Personal Is Planetary

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As an ecopsychologist and a psychosynthesis practitioner, I am excited that the lead article for the new AAP journal is on "Ecopsychosynthesis" I join Molly in her call to the psychosynthesis community to awaken and respond to the ecological crisis we are facing, applying our key roles as healers and visionaries in affecting the outcome of our shared future. I also believe that psychosynthesis needs to learn from ecological perspectives as well as offer its wisdom to the emerging field of ecopsychology

Ecopsychology and our human condition

Around 1990 I began hearing the term ecopsychology and was pleased that there was now a name for a growing, yet still inchoate, response to the deteriorating condition of our lives and planet. My own understanding of ecopsychology had emerged from my lifelong search to unearth the source of the confusion, sorrow, and loneliness that I often felt and saw in the world around me. Growing up in an indifferent and unjust culture, amid threats of nuclear annihilation and the ongoing destruction of the environment, I wondered how human life could have gone so awry I felt that our existence had become a mystifying, yet urgent, koan and that the solution of this riddle would help return us to the depth of our true nature, to its beauty vibrancy and wonder This search for understanding has taken me down many fruitful paths but most notably to Buddhism, Taoism, feminism, psychology and wild nature itself.

Ecopsychology is attempting to explain the causes of and connections between our individual, social and global dysfunction in order to create powerful interventions for healing and change. To do this, it is integrating many of the insights of deep ecology ecofeminism, transpersonal and conventional psychologies, earth-based cultures, and

non-dual Eastern philosophies. At the heart of ecopsychology is the concept of eco-alienation – the belief that the wound to our psyche and spirit caused by humankind’s estrangement from the natural world impairs us profoundly on every level of being, from the most personal to the planetary. Thus, we cannot adequately treat the individual or society without understanding and addressing the largest context from which our suffering arises.

Consciousness splits apart

There are many ways to understand how we have become so disconnected from our place within the natural universe. Molly refers to many of these in her article. The perspective that I find most compelling is especially relevant to psychosynthesists for it looks at how human consciousness has split apart into divisive dualities. While, as Molly points out, psychosynthesis is partially structured on these same problematic dualities, I believe that we can learn from our own understanding of creating synthesis from polarities and share this wisdom with others.

When studying the history of philosophy in the West, over the past 3,000 years, we find a consistent pattern of dualistic thinking that has ranked one side of the duality as superior and has devalued, exploited and suppressed the other. The most significant polarities include human over nature, masculine over feminine, mind over body, and spirit over matter. (See below)

Valued/Superior

Self	Man	Human	Culture	Tame	Civilized	White	Mind	Thought	Heaven	Spirit
Other	Woman	Animal	Nature	Wild	Primitive	Non-white	Body	Emotions	Earth	Matter

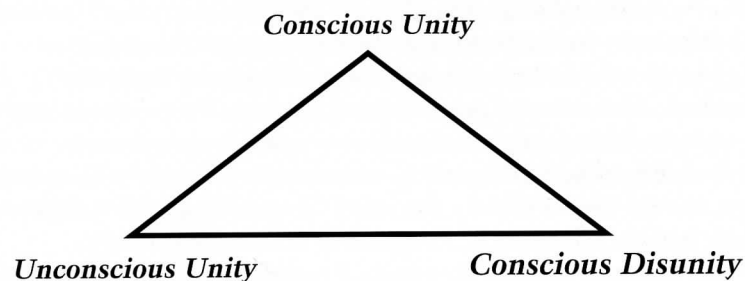
Devalued/Inferior

While these pairs may occur naturally the splitting of them and the subordination of one side of the polarity has caused a profound distortion in the way we think, know ourselves and relate to others. What is labeled as nature and wild, of the body and earth, is seen as the

“other” to be dominated, controlled and used. Western religion, science and philosophy have all been built on this dualism. The ecological crisis we are now facing is the most devastating symptom of the breakdown of this way of perceiving and thinking. Due to our increased population and the ability to destroy on a massive scale, we are currently experiencing the negative consequences of these polarizations most acutely. This is causing pandemic “diseases of disconnection” which are now impacting all living beings and the planet itself.

For example, much of our personal pain can be seen as stemming from the fractured, unintegrated experience of oneself as an isolated ego, alienated from the senses, body and the living world. This view coincides with the Buddhist understanding that it is our false belief in a separate self that is the root of suffering. Everywhere we see isolation and the frequent breakdown of friend, family and community bonds. Disconnected from our authentic emotional and physical needs, we have created technology, lifestyles and products that persistently undermine our basic health and well-being. Social and cultural groups are often objectified as “other”, considered to be “less than human”, and therefore “suitable” for domination so that the rich oppress the poor, whites oppress non-whites, one nation oppresses another, etc. The anthropocentric view of humankind’s supremacy has created global economic values that allow the natural world to be poisoned and exploited despite knowledge of the harmful consequences. In this disconnected state, it is as if our right hand is capable of destroying the left without the awareness that it is injuring its “larger” self.

This pattern of dualism can be understood as part of the natural developmental process of human consciousness rather than as a “mistake” or “pathology” of the human race. Transpersonal philosophers hypothesize that we have evolved from the “unconscious unity” phase of our ancient past – a time of unself-conscious, undifferentiated fusion with the world – to our current struggle with “conscious dis-unity”. This second stage of evolution, brought on by increasing self-awareness, is defined by a “fall” from union through the development of the self-conscious ego and the capacity for dualistic thinking. In this latter phase, we define ourselves as separate individuals, emphasizing independence, identifying differences, and having complex abilities such as rational deduction, deceptive behavior and, on a larger scale, the “achievements” of civilization. We are now being called to enter the next stage, a transpersonal shift to “conscious unity”, the synthesis of the two previous phases. Here we have union again, this time knowingly and wakefully experiencing our interconnected boundarylessness. This can be envisioned in the synthesis triangle. (See figure overleaf)



As Molly explains, a key piece in understanding our alienation can be found in our most basic concepts of self, how we define and experience what is us and what is not. This exploration of "Who am I?" invites the mingling of mysticism and psychology. We are discovering new ways to know ourselves that are in harmony with both new science (which explores nature without) and ancient spiritual wisdom (which explores nature within), each describing and extolling the interdependent, indivisible web of creation. Our current crisis points to the obsolescence of our old ego-self and the emergence of an inclusive ecological identity.

Healing the splits: ecopsychotherapy

How do we most skillfully facilitate this return to wholeness, to embracing ourselves as part of the larger natural world and the Universe itself? Although I use ecopsychological approaches in my individual psychotherapy sessions, I agree with Molly and Bill Plotkin that the most obvious, reliable, and powerful way to facilitate this shift is to spend extended time in wild nature, especially alone.

To touch our own larger nature, we may need to step out from the cloistered isolation of modern culture and into the vast, mysterious richness of the more-than-human world that knows nothing of concepts or dualisms. If we leave behind the relentless distractions, activities, habits, and structures of Western Civilization that serve to both numb us and reinforce our separation, the walls and assumptions of our limited identities readily fall away. All the great spiritual teachings manifest themselves when we learn, as Molly says, to "consult the living intelligence of the earth both 'outside' and 'inside'." The blueprint for our own personal unfolding is reflected vividly everywhere in the natural processes of life.

My work in wild nature, based on the approach of John Milton's Sacred Passage programs (Bisbee, AZ), incorporates practices from

Buddhist, Taoist and shamanic traditions. Depending on one's readiness, experience and degree of sincerity and preparation, this work in "opening the sacred view" may impact and transform us in the ways described below.

Reconnection with the senses and the body

Time in nature demands that we slow down, pay close attention and rely on our five senses. Our awakened animal body then moves once again in rhythm with its origin – the body of the earth – instead of blindly rushing to the meter of machines, electronics and arbitrary schedules. The mind quiets and listens, the body relaxes and fully breathes; we let go of mental fabrications and become immersed in the living present. The abundant vital life energy, or chi, becomes accessible, and we begin to rebalance. The gap between mind and body begins to dissolve and healing of emotional and physical problems can occur.

One of my clients suffered from a scattered, frantic mind and a tense, agitated body from severe lifelong Attention Deficit Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Stress reduction and psychotherapy approaches brought limited results. Although she could not meditate in the traditional way, she was able, for the first time in her life to sit quietly when outdoors, listening openly and relaxed to the sights and sounds of the forests and sky. With time, she became so still and calm that a chipmunk regularly fed from her hand and allowed her to stroke its back. Not only did her emotional and mental state improve, but she found incredible joy and delight in this simple contact with another being.

Expansion of identity beyond the separate ego

Alone in wild nature, mindful and open, we observe that the same natural forces that create the weather, the mountain and trees are at work within us. The illusion of the separate bubble of self is constantly being challenged. Matter and energy are continually being exchanged between living and non-living forms. One being eats and absorbs another being in an endless flow of transformation. The distinctions between inner and outer, "me" and "not-me" are no longer clear.

Watching the 14,000 foot snowcap above me slowly melt into the frigid wild river below sitting through rain and hail storms that fed into that stream, and then drinking from that river over many days, I wonder: am I the snow? the stream? the rain? What am I? Sitting for hours on

the edge of a mountain meadow melding into my surroundings, I begin to "know" minutes before they appear, when and where an animal will walk into the field. Who knows this?

Restored membership in the more-than-human community

As the small self relinquishes its control and our superficial human conditioning diminishes, one's sense of community expands beyond the human circle to include relationships with the myriad of non-human beings. We can begin to communicate with, learn from and touch the unique consciousness of all animate matter. While this is commonplace in earth-based cultures, it can seem remarkable and transformative in our own. From this experience a deep, sometimes previously unknown, sense of belonging, aliveness and connection may arise. Some describe it as being welcomed home again, the ending of an old loneliness. Here the division between human and nature, civilized and wild collapses.

When I started my month long wilderness solo retreat in Colorado a few years ago, I felt like a foreigner, and, at times, an interloper, on this high desert slope. By the end, I had become another mountain creature, sharing the water, breezes and shade with my companions. At first, when I was seen, the other animals would bound away frightened. Gradually as they accepted my presence and the line between our seemingly different worlds blurred, I could feel my own vital wildness awakening. I was joined in my rituals and exercises by lizards, birds and even a large antlered buck. A squirrel hopped onto my bare leg as I sat at ease under a pinyon pine. Rabbits ate contentedly nearby as I brushed my teeth. A doe stood disinterested and relaxed as her young spotted fawn skipped up to me with curiosity

Transformative transpersonal experience

Anyone who frequently goes into nature in a sacred way will report unexplained and extraordinary events. The significance of these occurrences is not their sensational quality but how they challenge, in a profound way, our limited assumptions about ourselves and reality. Rigid, culturally dictated notions of what is real and what is possible begin to dissolve. We start to realize that there is much more to ourselves and life than we ever imagined, or can ever truly understand. Synchronicities abound and events occur that seem to have unusual personal significance. From this arises awe, respect, wonder, sometimes terror, sometimes delight. We can also get a lasting taste of the unitive experience, when being alone transforms into being "all one" this unity

revealed in witnessing the ever-changing dance of stars, water, flowers and stones. Here differences between self and environment, matter and spirit, form and formless end.

Again in Colorado I experienced what others have described as "hearing the mountains sing" As my retreat progressed, the music became more distinct, drifting down from the mountains above or up from the river below. When I would wake at night I could hear it's gentle accompaniment. Sometimes, I heard large orchestrated chords creating lush harmonies. At other times, the music was performed on a single instrument similar to an organ, harmonica, or accordion. I also heard individual and group voices, singing melodies or chants. The sounds were so clear that I sometimes would unsuccessfully search the landscape for a human creator. I cannot explain this experience, nor do I try now to determine if it was "real" or not. But it has altered my view of what we call reality and deepened my appreciation of the extraordinary mystery of this existence.

Compassion for oneself and all beings

Time in nature brings us face to face with not only beauty and grace but with our most entrenched fears. Observing the cycles of life, we see our own inevitable decay and destruction. This awareness of our vulnerability and mortality invites tenderness and compassion for all beings who share this fate. Our expanded sense of self restores our capacity to fully feel the pain in our left hand when it is injured by the right. Believing that harming the earth is also harming ourselves is no longer a metaphoric ideal but a directly experienced reality.

During a wilderness retreat, a woman was visited regularly by hummingbirds whirring and dancing through the air. At least once a day, the largest of the hummers would stop in midair, two or three feet in front of her forehead and hover there for a few seconds, looking at her. She soon felt that the little hummers "had stolen [her] heart away" and triggered in her "a profound sense of humility, respect and joy" As she gazed out over the vast valley view from her sacred site, reflection on "their vulnerability wrenched [her] heart" and the thought of the destruction of their winter home in the rain forest "was almost unbearable" That night in a state "where the boundary had dissolved between waking and sleeping" she felt as though her mind was "floating in the mind of Nature" and felt the "sense of infinite being and the bursting open of [her] heart"

A clear sense of path and purpose

Whether a retreat into wild nature is called a "vision quest" or not, it is common for people to return with a powerful vision and new understanding for their work and personal lives. These may come as sudden clear insights, through vivid or unusual dreams or by witnessing specific events. These experiences can impact us at such a deep level that they bypass our ordinary doubts and ambivalence. In connecting deeply to natural forces, we feel ourselves as part of a much larger meaningful unfolding design. It's as if our will becomes aligned with the "wild will" of the planet and our voice becomes the "voice of the earth"

At dusk, a great sea turtle crawled ashore to lay her eggs in a secluded, protected Pacific cove shared by a man on a 7-day solo Sacred Passage. He felt deeply moved to have the privilege of witnessing this ancient and intimate process. However, to his horror, soon afterwards, a loose domestic pig, not natural to this fragile ecosystem, systematically worked its way down the beach eating every egg the turtle had laid. The shock of this experience triggered in him "a profound inspiration to dedicate [his] life energy" to taking a stand wherever human ignorance harms the balance of natural systems. He described feeling "a clarity of purpose to love, honor and protect life" He consequently made significant changes in all areas of his life and, many years later, passionately continues his work for the planet.

Conclusion

During this century we have already seen the inevitable force of synthesis emerge and the tide begin to turn tentatively toward a consciousness based on interconnection. It can be seen in the rise of feminism and other movements for equality, the development of mind-body medicine, the championing of animal rights, the resurgence of nature-based spirituality and the spread of ecological and systems thinking, best symbolized by the blue orb of self-regulating Gaia.

As psychosynthesists, we can share our tools for uncovering our deepest truths and for facilitating synthesis. It is the healing of these splits in consciousness, that are both personal and planetary, that will allow the Great Turning, as Molly puts it, to happen. We can join ecopsychology's mission to help guide humankind through the paradigm shift from the egocentric self to the ecocentric universe. Ultimately the ecological crisis is not inviting "us" to save this "external" planet. But it is inviting "us" as part of the planet itself, to awaken and see our true nature.

Suggested Readings:

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