

Mind and Environment:

A Psychological Survey of Perspectives Literal, Wide, and Deep

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I had intended to begin this presentation with a parody of how thoroughly psychotherapy previously neglected our relationship with the environment, but when I tried to write an ironic scenario, it kept turning into a real situation.

Picture (I was going to suggest) a city block which the client must negotiate in order to reach the therapy office. After going by a lawn reeking with pesticides, blankets of smoggy air, honking car horns, people shouting at each other, screeching tires, yelling cops, and a car crash, the client makes it to the therapist's office and relates a brief account of this mini-odyssey, whereupon the therapist asks, "So how are things going with your mother?"

I wish this were a parody, this lapsing of the entire world into a giant Rorschach blot of psychological family values, but it isn't. It's how therapists the world over reasoned until rather recently, when it began to dawn on thoughtful practitioners that clients had feelings about the actual, tangible world humming along outside the self.

It's difficult to say when this awakening began; difficult enough that it's easier to pin down when it temporarily vanished. Early practitioners of psychotherapy had not worried unduly about the environment, but at least they recognized its psychological impact. Things changed with Freud. To be more specific, they changed when Freud decided that *supposing* one had been traumatized was more important psychologically than *being*

a genuine victim. From there it was a short step to reinterpreting everything that interested or provoked the therapy patient solely in terms of the inner life, the transference, or the troubled family. Freud's colleague Karl Abraham largely ignored the combat stress of the soldiers he worked with, attributing their symptoms instead to early problems with oral gratification or

toilet training.

A hundred years later, therapists still practice who believe that pressing, urgent facts like global warming have little or no impact on the supposedly inner life. Today, although Earth's temperature rises dangerously, 50% of species are at risk of extinction within 50 years, 27% of ocean reefs are gone, 84% of the planet surface has been interfered with, 100% of large rivers in the U.S. are polluted, entire governments are in the hands of ruthless oil barons practicing what Karl Wittfogel termed "hydraulic despotism," and mass advertising which supports a planet-wasting economy remains the largest psychological project ever undertaken, not enough therapists pause to wonder what these dismal facts mean to a client, let alone ask about them.

It would certainly be unfair to assign Freud all the blame for this. The assumed split between self and environment runs back through Western history to before the Idealist and postmodern philosophies put everything back into the signifier-generating brain; before the monotheistic preoccupation with another, better world; before Descartes, father of the mind-body problem child; before Plato, who kept both eyes on a realm of Ideas open only to mathematicians and philosopher kings; all the way back, in fact, eleven thousand concept-laden, gadget-busy years to the Fertile Crescent, where a band of people caught in a drought began plowing the ground systematically, thereby separating enough from it psychologically to use it as a resource.

This fed them and gave them new tools and us Western civilization, but at a price: a sense of separation from Home that over time has overdeveloped into pathological estrangement--pathological for us as well as for the planet.

Psychology is both a symptom of and a response to this estrangement. With the disappearance of the nature spirits under the wheels of conquest and industry, people turned away in fear from what they were told was a fallen and evil world of nature to the only sources of intelligent aliveness left: inside the human skull.

As C. G. Jung put it, "The gods have become diseases." The nature gods in particular. What were previously regarded as relational imbalances between self and world, imbalances to be healed through ritual and reconnection with earthly forces, were now diagnosed and treated as problems seething only within the person. It is no accident that the term "animism" came into use as a disparagement of the indigenous experience of the world's aliveness just a

few years before the first psychological laboratories were established. Where there was ceremony, now would psychology be.

Of course, not everyone involved in psychology believed the split between mind and environment to be so absolute. Jung would not be the last to argue nearly a century ago for a more realistic and dialogical model. The evolution of family therapy out of group therapy pushed the zone of interest outward into intergenerational territory, and social work made interface with the community one of its best specialties. Even so, the psychological presence of the physical environment has remained more or less in the shadows of therapeutic consciousness until fairly recently as evolving projects in the age-old campaign to protect the ecosphere have brought our connections to the nonhuman world into the foreground at last.

The remainder of this presentation will offer brief examples of what some of these environmental projects and perspectives have to say about human psychology, sanity, and well-being. As we survey them we will gradually move our field of attention from literal interactions between self and world into more symbolically rich levels of mutuality whose depths embrace and move below the surface. This should help us begin to see how intimately the terrain around us reaches into the life within us.

Environmental and Ecological Psychology

Environmental psychology is not one field, but an umbrella term for many. Within it, history, urban planning and design, cognitive science, geography, cultural anthropology, political science, architecture, sociology, economy, and yes, psychology clash or work harmoniously together, depending.

In general, this perspective studies how we perceive the environment, including our innate and acquired sensitivities and cognitive maps for understanding it; how the environment impacts us, from natural disasters to crowded sidewalks; and how we impact the environment through overconsumption, waste, overpopulation, etc.

German social psychologist Kurt Lewin (pronounced "luh-VEEN") did not set out to found an environmental science, but at a time when psychology was preoccupied with taking mental

life apart into aggregates of sensation, he was part of the famous group of researchers affiliated with the University of Berlin who studied consciousness as a field entity after WW I. Out of this collaboration, which included research by Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Köhler, emerged Gestalt (“Form” or “Pattern”) psychology, an anti-reductionist perspective that compared consciousness to music and its components to notes which cannot be meaningfully appreciated in isolation from one another. Gestalt research on patterns of perception effectively destroyed the reduction of perception to individual associations or sensations that had dominated psychology from Edward Titchener onward. The path lay open to the view of human beings as natural makers and organizers of meaning.

It did not take Lewin very long to begin applying this field orientation to human relationships. His work with group interactions began a legacy that flowered later into group dynamics and Family Systems psychotherapy. In 1936 he published *Principles of Topological Psychology* to demonstrate how aspects of the immediate surround possess psychologically potent effects in constant interaction with a person’s “life space” consisting of the self, the geographical locale, and the relations between the two. Lewin’s insistence on importing mathematical terms like “valence” into his model obscured for decades its importance as a field approach to human psychology.

Having lain fallow for a decade or so, environmental psychology reappeared in 1947 with Roger Barker’s work at the research station he founded in Oskaloosa, Kansas. “The Midwest Psychological Field Station,” he explained, “was established to facilitate the study of human behavior and its environment *in situ* by bringing to psychological science the kind of opportunity long available to biologists: easy access to phenomena of the science unaltered by the selection and preparation that occur in laboratories.” His focus on the 750 residents of Oskaloosa included interactions among children and how the unfinished and uncertain nature of the frontier shaped the character of those who lived upon it. His conclusion was that human behavior and mental life are so radically, profoundly situated that they cannot be understood apart from their environmental context. Social workers benefit from this fact when they see clients at home. Therapists forced to work around it by seeing clients in an office or at a clinic can expand their assessments to include questions about the client’s home and work life, neighborhood, areas of recreation, and favorite locales. Friends and family can be asked how the client acts in various settings.

Eventually Barker called his brand of research *ecological psychology*. So, alas, did perceptual scientist James Gibson. (Don’t confuse either approach with ecopsychology, to be discussed later.) Gibson’s interest began with visual capability and direct perception and ended in the conviction that all human learning relies on the environment in which it occurs. In other words, it is an ongoing process of mutuality between people and things, selves

and surroundings, rather than governed entirely by internal maps, memory banks, or other cognitive schema. "It's not what is inside the head that's important," he liked to say, "but what the head is inside of."

What this means is that learning and doing are guided primarily by perception, with the human participant active not as a computer but as a response tool like a thermostat or a radio tuner. Instead of seeing action as an intake, processing, storage, and dispensing of information, ecological psychology assumes ongoing perceiving-acting cycles linking self to the world in which we evolved: a world replete with *affordances*, or opportunities for certain learnings and activities geared to specific intentions and goals that in turn effect change in the environment. Learning and doing arise together and depend on each other, as when the member of a gym runs a treadmill without thinking, with body and mind in motion automatically.

In theory this makes the environment a partner in learning; but automatic behavior is an instructive metaphor. You might recall the quaint notion that science is value-free and objective, a notion that merely hands science over to those who bid the highest from outside the sterilized laboratory. In psychology this was a favorite maxim of Francis Galton, founder of eugenics and mental tests, and Edward Titchener, founder of Structuralism, whose vision of pure research included requiring graduate students keep down a plastic tube that made them vomit and referring to experimental subjects as "reagents." (Henry Goddard's term was "human material.") A class Titchener taught almost nauseated Abraham Maslow out of becoming a psychologist. James Cattell, the first psychologist to analyze psychological findings statistically, was not a structuralist, but he was an advocate of sterilizing the inferior and paying bright people to have offspring. John Watson most successfully translated the value-free idea into hard cash by selling behavioral science techniques to the advertising industry after being relieved of his professorship at Johns Hopkins.

Now more aware of the power of the environment, psychology took on the American pragmatic habit known in psychology as "functionalism" to produce *proxemics*, or the study of how we unconsciously organize personal space around each other, in homes, in workplaces, cities, and other inhabited zones laid out in culturally shaped patterns.

Anthropologist E.T. Hall introduced proxemics in his book

The Hidden Dimension

(1966). Another pragmatic study,

ergonomics

, came out of the work of David Canter and the Performance Research Unit at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. From 1966 on, this research guided how to design various kinds of equipment to maximize productivity while minimizing human fatigue.

A weakness inherent in this empirical-quantitative approach is the psychological distance between who is doing the research and what is being researched. This distance seduces the scientist into forgetting unconscious motivations and the fantasies that guide the search for objectivity: an objectivity that turns people and landscapes into objects--in this case, of consumption. Combined with the stimulus-response emphasis of behaviorism, mass marketing and advertising firms employ specialists to measure how much air a bag of chips can contain before sales fall off, or at what shelf height a priced-up item should be to catch a consumer's eye. Colors and sounds and even smells in retail stores influence the moods and perceptions of shoppers.

Here is an excerpt from "Globalization and the Commercialization of Childhood" by child psychologist Allen Kanner:

The Girls Intelligence Agency (GIA) is a relatively new American company that offers the services of its 40,000 "agents"—girls aged six to eighteen—to corporate customers that want to create a buzz for their products. GIA recruits these girls from around the country by inviting them to become an "official GIA agent" of a "very elite group." The girls are given exclusive offers for products, events, and free online fashion consultation with Agent Kiki, a supposed "big sis" who in fact is the GIA staff providing answers to the girls' email questions. The hallmark of GIA is its "Slumber Party in a Box," in which a GIA girl invites up to eleven friends for an overnight party at which she passes out free products—toys, cosmetics, films, and the like—while taking notes for GIA on her friends' reactions. She does not tell them that the event is sponsored. In fact, GIA instructs the girls to "be slick and find out some sly scoop on your friends," such as what they think is currently fashionable.

There's so much wrong with this picture that it's hard to know where to start: large corporations teaching girls to manipulate their friends for profit, parents going along with it, the girls being used as consultants for a pittance (they get to keep product samples but don't get paid), GIA lying to its young agents about Agent Kiki, the company recruiting girls by playing to their need to be recognized as special when in fact the girls are being used and deceived.

How does this level of socially sanctioned mass manipulation show up in the consulting room? Shoppaholism, television used to numb unpleasant feelings, automaton conformity,

pathetically superficial chatter, hatred of routinized work resurfacing as physical symptoms, nightmares about robots, vampires, terrorists, or manikins, and a growing inability to go outside of increasingly smart houses built so people can live inside their own computers. Formerly, presenting issues looked like hysteria, conversion disorder, phobic avoidance, or repressed passions. Today they look like anomie, passionlessness, dissociation, and self-alienation. In the culture of palliatives and instant distractions, it can take several sessions to find out what the client even wants from life, from relationships, from anything.

As Erich Fromm pointed out in an introduction to Orwell's book *1984*, the issue is not so much that the barrage of images, slogans, and opinions are lies as that they come after a while to feel like they emanate from within rather than from without. Educator Paulo Freire designed a dialogical technique called *problematizing*

to encourage people to tell the difference by inquiring into the sources of their attitudes and values, convictions and beliefs. People who can sort genuine ideas, needs, and emotions from those implanted by conditioning do not make devoted shoppers or followers, but they tend to understand what they want from life and to make plans for realizing some of their dreams.

Notice the narrowly artificial conception of "environment" so far, with bits and pieces mined from the actual world to establish one bounded by surfaces, containers, and stimuli. With our next perspective we begin to get the feeling that we're not in Kansas anymore.

Conservation Psychology

is the project to "green" psychology by explicitly designing social science research to promote sustainable societies. The word "sustainable" having become trendy, a quick definition might be of use here: sustainability refers to practices and styles of working and living that 1. do not exceed local carrying capacity and 2. do not use up resources which our children and their children will need. In simple language, a sustainable society is one that does not take from the land, sea, or air more than they can replenish.

Conservation psychology refers to a network or conglomeration of collaborative efforts toward ecologically relevant research leading to practical outreach. Carol Saunders defines this field as follows: "Conservation psychology is the scientific study of the reciprocal

relations between humans and the rest of nature, with a particular focus on how to encourage conservation of the natural world.” It is both an applied field and a gathering of researchers.

Their primary goal: finding and sharing compelling empirical evidence that demonstrates connections between nature and mind. An example of this would be recent research on empathy, a quality human beings share with other primates. Think about dolphins who push drowning humans to the ocean surface so we can breathe, or dogs who whimper when their human friends are in pain, or friendly cats who curl up in the laps of people who are crying. Jeffrey Mogil just finished a study at McGill University which suggests the activity of empathy even in mice. When able to see each other suffering, the animals were more sensitive to pain inflicted on them as well.

In the view of conservation psychology, making a scientific case for our psychological partnership with the natural world will encourage more of us to preserve that world, for we destroy it at the cost of our own psychological well-being.

The research done is therefore normative, in Maslow’s sense of embracing values stated up front, rather than hiding behind a cloak of objectivity. In addition to sustainability, the values include a focus on solving problems, a tying of the academic to the practical, a stronger dialog between social science and natural science, a moving beyond studying how things already are (as traditional psychology does) into examining how to empower people to make sustainable choices, a willingness to draw on other social sciences (for instance, Human Ecology and Environmental Sociology) in the service of fostering conservation, a widening of concern beyond human environments to the human-nature relationship as a whole, and a constant focus on doing research that improves that relationship. A criterion of success will be whether that research leads to programs and projects that promote conservation.

So far the focus has remained quantitative rather than qualitative. This is not surprising given the policymaking emphasis on graphs and numbers. As the psychotherapist sees every day, however, attitudes held for emotionally immature reasons are seldom amenable to challenge by research. Global warming from fossil fuel combustion was predicted as early as 1859, and evidence for it has been around since 1908. There’s been little serious scientific doubt about it since 1988, and yet the global temperature continues to rise as misinformed sectors of the American public remain in firm denial.

Although conservation psychology has emphasized empirical research, it will have to confront the therapeutic implications of its mission to motivate people to care more about the natural world. What sorts of insights or learnings lead to more sustainable behavior? Is it possible for therapists to work from an ecologically normative framework without imposing it on their clients or trying to turn them into environmental activists? Yes, assuming the therapist keeps a steady eye on their own agenda. The greater danger has proved to be misinterpreting the client's ecological grief or anxiety as purely personal rather than taking them at face value. I believe a time is close at hand where more and more therapists will spend session time helping clients problem-solve alternatives to lapsing into despair over increasingly obvious catastrophes like global warming or the mass extinction of plant and animal life now underway.

Ecology

“Ecology” derives from the Greek words *oikos* (household) and *logos* (study) and constitutes the examination of interrelationships between organisms and their environment. The word was coined in 1866 by German biologist-philosopher Ernest Haeckel. Because the word has grown soft over the years from “eco-” being applied to everything from crackers to condoms, some have made the mistaken assumption that ecology is some sort of spiritual revival. In fact, ecology is an empirical, research-oriented, multidisciplinary science that draws on biology, geology, geography, mathematics, chemistry, meteorology, cybernetics, and systems theory. Its basic unit of study is the *ecosystem*:

an assembly of living things that interacts as a unit or system.

Ecosystems are flows and configurations of biological energy that balance themselves through various kinds of interactions: *parasitism*, where one species benefits at the expense of another; *mutualism*, where species help each other flourish; *commensalism*

, a more neutral interaction; *amensalism*, an unwitting restriction of one species by another—think of tree secretions killing a ground plant—called

amensalism

; and of course

predation

, which keeps the prey in check.

Ecologists also study the following roles that keep an ecosystem going: *producers* (often plants) that make food and therefore energy;

consumers

that eat it (primary consumers are usually herbivores, secondary consumers carnivores, etc.), and

decomposers

that return organic remains back to their earthly sources.

Ecosystems themselves can play various roles, particularly in terms of how old and how healthy they are. *Succession species* populate relatively barren areas with pioneer plants to make way for more complex arrangements of living things. An ecosystem at the height of stability and maturity is said to reach *climax*, like a stand of old growth forest. If the system gets out of balance, however, whether from environmental catastrophe or too many members of one species dominating all the others, it can go into

drawdown

, where resources are consumed faster than they can be replenished by the land's

carrying capacity

. If this continues it leads to a system

crash

resulting in

dieback

, or the extinction of important keystone species.

I mention ecology, first, because it concerns itself with the terrestrial stage upon which we live. As one species among many, we are subject to the laws of ecology, including those governing the balance of life on Earth. Like other species, we have the capacity to sense when drawdown of resources is leading, as it now is all over the world, toward ecological crash as the top predators continue to ignore the basic facts of ecological reality. So pervasive is what's being called *eco-anxiety* that "20/20" and other programs are interviewing counselors, environmentalists, and other specialists to learn more about it. A task for the therapist will be to recognize and validate the client's feelings of ecological angst and suggest ways to work with them consciously, including expressing them dramatically, artistically, or politically. Getting involved with an activity directed at environmental preservation can offer sense of being part of the healing rather than watching helplessly as the polar ice caps weep, the atmosphere runs a temperature, and the ecosphere suffers a nervous breakdown.

Second, ecology invites the idea that the human mind works more like a self-balancing ecosystem or ecocommunity than like a programmed machine. In Freud's day, images of

self were hydraulic; for the behaviorists, chains of stimulus and response; for evolutionary psychologists, preprinted circuits and operating systems: a computer's vision of human psychology. No one has explained how a machine run by automatic modules can successfully interface with the aliveness going on around it. On the contrary, even cybernetic hardwiring is starting to use circular pathways, systemic properties, and chaos systems similar to those of organic interactivity: a reproduction and externalization of the dissociated, nervous flesh. After centuries of reductionism, we are finally beginning to recognize our deterministic descriptions of ourselves, whether in therapy or outside of it, as projections trying to revive some inner deadness by reconnecting it to a still-vital world.

Human Ecology

Human ecology is a hybrid of ecology and sociology. Its focus is on the human component of the world's natural and artificial ecocommunities. One of its early sources was the Chicago School, a center for urban sociology active during the 1920s. Their focus was empirically done fieldwork.

Over time human ecology evolved to view human culture as ecologically situated rather than as a system of ideas or artifacts erected somewhere above the world and its other inhabitants. From this perspective, human disciplines like psychology and sociology are subfields of ecology rather than the reverse. In practice, human ecology tends to focus on human dysfunction in the vicinity of urban areas. Examples of research topics include how natural disasters destabilize the victims, how people react to overpopulation, how climate or meteorology influences a local economy, and how human attitudes impact environmental policies. The field is ecological in scope, but the focus remains primarily on the human component, particularly in terms of building design, health, and nutrition.

Human ecology complements the social worker's understanding of the powerful interplay between how people function and the local resources made available to them, then takes the additional step of placing social and psychological life back into their environmental context. In assessing how someone is doing, exploratory questions from this standpoint would be: Exactly how are this person's perceptions, attitudes, or behaviors impacted by, or even expressions of, some current combination of ecological pressures? What is going on around, below, or above? How can we measure it? What can be done about it?

A recent example of a human ecology problem centers on New Orleans, where the mental health system is itself in a state of breakdown and has been since Hurricane Katrina. Half the people still there afterwards indicated some need for counseling, but only 2% are getting it. "Katrina Brain" is rampant: difficulty focusing, depression, mood swings, and the like. The post-traumatic stress of the storm never gets to be "post-" because there isn't enough being done to aid in recovery. The suicide rate has tripled. Charity Hospital is working out of a former department store. "People will learn from us," says psychiatrist Mark Townsend. "Because a disaster like this will occur again."

Even so, the methods used to research it retain the quantification, objectification, emotional distancing, and literal-minded concretism of the physical sciences and techniques that fed internal combustion to start with. What about other ways of knowing, intuiting, and experiencing? What about sensings and promptings regularly reported by the indigenous dweller, the activist, the artist, the student, and the therapy client but culturally demonized as unscientific? Those were the questions for thinkers, scholars, and activists who began to ask whether the objectification of human beings paralleled the objectification of the natural world.

Deep Ecology

Having survived psychoanalysis by a student of Freud, activist and philosopher Arne Naess remained intellectually indebted to Spinoza, Gandhi, Husserl, Marx, and the Buddha and experientially married to the forests of Norway. An avid mountaineer, he was the youngest faculty to work as a full professor at the University of Oslo. He had fought in the resistance against the Nazi occupation and been arrested by Norwegian police for turning out to fight for the rights of the indigenous Sami community.

Naess coined the term "deep ecology" in his 1973 article, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements." In it he confronted the question of our supposed primacy in the natural world and argued that this humanocentric narcissism rendered much environmental "reform" superficial. What good were a few bandaid solutions while the psychological and philosophical assumptions on which a dysfunctional relation to the world depended went entirely unquestioned? Too often mere reformism sold quick fixes, some technological, without promoting fundamental change in the destructive, expansionist, consumption-fixated values of an overindustrialized civilization. (We saw above where that has lead.)

After working out a philosophical platform with George Sessions while they camped in Death Valley in 1984, Naess later defined “deep” in terms of a persistent Socratic questioning of culture-bound attitudes about nature opening up into lasting changes in how we perceive ourselves in the world. The platform, geared for change, was:

1) The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have intrinsic values (inherent worth) in and of themselves independent of their usefulness for human purposes.

2) Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.

3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

4) Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.

5) The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.

6) Policies must therefore be changed to affect basic economic and technological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.

7) The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (through appreciating situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.

8) Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation to directly or indirectly participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes. Naess’s motto is, “Simple in

means, rich in ends.”

The two fundamental norms, irreducible to any others, are: *Self-realization* (as opposed to ego-realization) of all things, and *biocentric equality*

, which opposes the anthropocentrism at the heart of our problem with nature. Warwick Fox believes that unlike other ecological perspectives, deep ecology moves the source of our war against nature from intraspecies (human) to interspecies, a move that transcends blaming politicians or industrialists by focusing on the widespread anthropocentric depreciation of the world as a mere thing for human use.

Also, deep ecologists see *identification*--with plants and animals, places, the world-- from the human end as the basis of interspecies empathy and relationship. (David Kidner prefers to talk about a “resonance” between self and other rather than “identification.”) People will not protect what they do not identify with or regard as an aspect of themselves.

As a pluralist, Naess believes that everyone should develop a unique ecophilosophy, or “ecosophy.” He calls his Ecosophy T. The “T” recalls his hut Tvergastein, named after quartz crystals found nearby. (One of Naess's models, Spinoza, was a lens-grinder.)

Not everyone likes the priority given to identification. Clinicians working with clients who already come in with fuzzy ego boundaries might well feel concerned at encouraging any greater permeability. On the other hand, building a sense of kinship with the features, details, and living things all around might work to strengthen and expand a normally fragile sense of self by making it more at home in its habitat.

Deep ecologists sometimes talk about anthropocentrism as a kind of narcissism. Seen through Karen Horney's emphasis on the cultural roots of mental disorders, narcissism shares with anthropocentrism an unwillingness to grant other things or people any reality outside of their utility to oneself. In other words, narcissism (named after Narcissus, who saw his face in a pool of water and fell in love with it) *mirrors* the elitist psychology so blatantly displayed at the socioeconomic peak of industrialized societies. It can be useful to probe beyond the façade of narcissistic personality to look for a disregard not only of human beings, but of the world at large, and to work with a deep fear of the world in parallel with a deep fear of intimacy.

Green Activism: Social Ecology and Ecofeminism

Social activist Murray Bookchin was among the first to praise deep ecology's willingness to probe into the human-centered assumptions that bolster our sense of superiority over the natural world—and among the first to criticize deep ecology's unwillingness to take power hierarchies fully into account.

Bookchin's field, *social ecology*, explicitly links ecological problems and social inequality by explaining the first as an inevitable result of the second: "...The hierarchical mentality and class relationships that so thoroughly permeate society give rise to the very idea of dominating the natural world." His best-known book, *The Ecology of Freedom*, argued this in 1982, although he had argued similarly in print even before Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*.

Some key emphases of social ecology:

- The domination-of-nature paradigm followed historically from domination of society by the state and, before that, of women by men. The key issue environmentally is therefore not identification or lack thereof, but the problems that radiate from centralized power.
- This hierarchical paradigm simultaneously wounds the ecosphere and subjects humans to widespread social injustices. It should be retired in favor of practices that encourage thinking and acting on behalf of complementarity between selves and between self and planet. Part of education's job should be to show people from early on how to get along with each other through negotiation, dialog, and other complementarity-enhancing skills.
- Capitalism based on perpetual expansion is not only wasteful and outmoded, it's now as much of a threat to the natural world as it has been to alienated, subjugated human beings

(workers, the poor) since at least the Industrial Revolution.

- Unchecked capitalism drives a crisis of our time: not the emergence of cities, but parasitic urbanization that ruins cities and rural areas alike.
- The artificial bifurcation of the world into “natural” and “unnatural” (human) cannot stand. Our “first nature” remains part of the natural world we damage through the misuse of our “second nature” symbol-juggling capacities.
- Bookchin criticizes what he saw as deep ecology’s blindness to the emergence of hierarchy: “As long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organizes humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will remain a predominant ideology and inevitably lead our planet to the brink, if not into the abyss, of ecological extinction.”

When criticized himself for making rich capitalists and other social elites into scapegoats for what is really a systemic lack of balance between humans and environment, Bookchin replied that such a criticism ignores the fact that, from the standpoint of social and ecological destructiveness, a black kid languishing in the ghetto could hardly be compared to the head of a multinational waster and polluter.

Originally, social ecology had focused primarily on class inequality. An ongoing conversation with ecofeminists modified this position.

Ecofeminism, from a term (“ecofeminisme”) introduced by French feminist philosopher Francois d’Eaubonne in the 1974 text *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, is a movement of liberation directed against the interlinked oppressions of sex, race, class, and environment. Names connected with this effort toward sustainable egalitarianism include Susan Griffin, Ynestra King, Karen Warding, Val Plumwood, and Carolyn Merchant. Like the social ecologists, they critique ecophilosophies that underestimate the power of hierarchical authority; but they examine a particularly persistent set of parallels too: those between the patriarchal disempowerment of women and the destruction of the natural world.

In both cases a relationship of domination and control emanates from a deep, unacknowledged fear of the unknown. An example is the traditionalist attitude that women are closer to nature and therefore fallen, evil, childish, or otherwise sullied, a bias reflected in early psychological theories. The Freud who asked, "What does a woman want?" is the Freud who dreamed of finding a dried specimen of his wife's favorite flower smashed in a weighty monograph. Although ecofeminists have criticized deep ecology's emphasis on unity (seen as a deemphasis of diversity and particularity), such as Plumwood, for whom "identifying" with nature is an extended egotism that replaces relationship with states of psychological fusion, the underlying problem remains the Western exaltation of "reason" as a suicidal display of ecological contempt. Susan Harding's analysis is provocative:

Science affirms the unique contributions to culture to be made by transhistorical egos that reflect a reality only of abstract entities; by the administrative mode of interacting with nature and other inquirers; by impersonal and universal forms of communication; and by an ethic of elaborating rules for absolute adjudications of competing rights between socially autonomous—that is, value-free—pieces of evidence. These are exactly the social characteristics necessary to become gendered as a man in our society.

And required as well by a high-octane consumerist complex built with the tools of "objective" science. Carolyn Merchant carries her critique even further:

Living animate nature died, while dead inanimate money was endowed with life. Increasingly capital and the market would assume the organic attributes of growth, strength, activity, pregnancy, weakness, decay, and collapse obscuring and mystifying the new underlying social relations of production and reproduction that make economic growth and progress possible. Nature, women, blacks, and wage laborers were set on a path toward a new status as "natural" and human resources for the modern world system. Perhaps the ultimate irony in these transformations was the new name given them: rationality.

The question is not whether such procedures rack up results--obviously they do--but of the price paid for their built-in distortions, particularly splits between mind and heart, objectivity and subjectivity, culture and nature, and facts and feelings that privilege the first of each pair while silencing the second.

The woman = matter equation plays out with increasing visibility, from automobiles sold as “sexy” to romantic partners “traded in” for newer and shinier models. In fact, an online community is burgeoning of lovers who cannot feel sexually excited without the noisome presence of car exhaust. Virtual relationships are replacing and ruining real ones; reports of environmental illness—a severe, allergic physical intolerance of synthetic products—rises as the ecosphere declines. With sexuality becoming mechanically supplemented and imaged, machinery takes on erotic attributes, from Microsoft to hard drives. In the mind of the voyeur, even surveillance has become sexy. As maintenance cycles, traffic lights, and schedules draw their enchantment from the displaced rhythms of nature and the body (“metropolis” comes from a word that means “mother”), computer viruses and genetic engineering mimic the forces of reproduction. In the Age of Information, when breast implants cast an illusion of maternal enhancement, agoraphobia begins to look like a fear of leaving the electronic womb.

Is staging a return to nature the therapy needed to heal the damage done by our psychological separation from the rest of the world? And if so, should it be done individually or by entire communities?

Bioregionalism

Bioregions are geographic areas that share common types of soil, climate, flora, and fauna. Think of a forest, a desert, a coastal region, or a watershed, which is the drainage area for a river or other large body of water. The edges of a bioregion normally aren't distinct; only the people who live locally can tell you where they are: the same people who know *how* it feels to live there, what they need from the land, and what the land needs from them.

In 1974 activist Peter Berg and wildlife ecologist Raymond Dasmann gave a name to this style of life and to its philosophy: *bioregionalism*, which is based on the premise that political jurisdictions based on power hierarchies exhibit an arbitrary competitiveness not seen when they are based instead on natural divisions and features of the terrain. These, not top-down regulatory authorities, should be the basis of local planning and resource management. In this way ecosystem, culture, and politics remain interrelated, as they were before the rise of national boundaries and barricades, and ecology meets anthropology through geography and naturalistic awareness.

The resulting psychology looks like one of settled, rooted, appreciative emplacement. As Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann suggest:

Living in place means following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to endure long-term occupancy of that site. A society which practices living-in-place keeps a balance with its region of support through links with human lives, other living creatures, and the processes of the planet--seasons, weather, water cycles, as revealed by the place itself. It is the opposite of a society which makes a living through short-term destructive exploitation of land and life.

Kirkpatrick Sale expresses it this way:

To become “dwellers in the land,” to regain the spirit of the Greeks, to fully and honestly come to know the earth, the crucial and perhaps only and all-encompassing task is to understand the place, the immediate, specific place, where we live. Schumacher says, “In the question of how we treat the land, our entire way of life is involved.” We must somehow live as close to it as possible, be in touch with its particular soils, its waters, its winds. We must learn its ways, its capacities, its limits. We must make its rhythms our patterns, its laws our guide, its fruits our bounty.

How to do this? The first task is *reinhabitation*: “becoming native to a place” that’s been injured by human exploitation. Reinhabiting it includes getting to know its ecological cycles, weather, native plants and animals, infrastructure demands, history, indigenous lore, and carrying capacity. Questions to research include: What watershed do I live in? What is the population of my town? Where does my food come from? Water? Electricity? Where does my trash go? What time does the sun rise and set? What phase is the moon in? What is the average rainfall? Who lived here before I did? What’s my relationship to all these things? What impact is my style of life having on the environment?

Bioregionalists point out that not knowing the answers to such questions reinforces the psychological distance between self and world created by dependency on far-off sources of food, power, and commodities whose human and environmental price tags we never see. As part of this, far-off corporate power structures collect local money every time a development

scheme goes through or a department store opens while displacing local businesses, local exchanges, local relationships, and the local soil and water. This dependency fosters a deep sense of insecurity unknown to premodern inhabitants who knew how to grow their own food, clothe themselves, entertain themselves and each other, and provide themselves with housing and transportation without having to rely on the distant empire.

Bioregional practices include the following:

- Human beings evolved in settings where relatively small groups of people worked together as kindred and intimately understood the ground they walked and lived on. Living like this once again can eliminate much of the alienation, uprootedness, self-numbing, mind-body splitting, and antisocial aggression endemic to highly industrialized societies.
- Food is best grown and bought locally to support local farmers and reduce dependency on pesticide-laden products gathered and processed by invisible low-wage labor and shipped in from great distances spanned by the burning of fossil fuels.
- As many commodities as possible are produced, bought, and sold locally to prevent organizations with no emotional investment in the bioregion from exploiting it and dominating the local economy.
- Those who actually live in a bioregion know best how to manage it. Top-down solutions from far away are to be suspected.
- Local democracy is based on direct participation, genuine consensus, and small-group discussion. (As Leopold Kohr put it, "If something is wrong, then something is too big.")
- Bioregional economics aim for a steady state rather than unlimited, wasteful expansion. Taking a cue from the natural world, they put conservation ahead of profit.

- As a result, resource use and waste are minimized and recycling and replenishment of natural systems maximized.
- The real experts of an area are the indigenous people who have lived there and gathered information about the locale over many generations.

As utopian as all this might sound to industrialized ears, experimentation with it goes on around the world. One example is Salmon Nation, a loose organization of citizens living in the coastal regions of California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska—“wherever the salmon run,” as they put it. This alliance of villagers, urbanites, farmers, loggers, fishers, and bioregional theorists is consciously managing a sustainable network. Salmon Nation is organized by EcoTrust (1991), a nonprofit put together by environmental consultant Jeanette Armstrong to promote a spirit of at-home-ness and ecological responsibility attuned to the rhythms of the land and sea. Salmon Nation sponsors its own local festivals and celebrations, its own local currency and trade, its own arts and crafts, various community building projects, plays and poetry, a plan to see everyone housed and fed, and even a local charge card, the Salmon Nation Visa.

It would be interesting to assess Salmon Nation and other bioregional experiments to find out their impact on local mental health. So far we have only word-of-mouth reports to go on, but for now they seem very favorable in terms of happiness, groundedness, and a sense of belonging. They also call into question our tendency to see mental health so individualistically. People with deep psychological troubles are seldom members of a supportive community.

Bioregionalism's call to tend the land more intelligently raises the question of how this might be done. It also raises the question of how to live in a place without retreating into mud huts or caves. In 1978, two men set about designing a set of techniques for this, some inspired by the land-tending practices of the aboriginal people of Australia, the oldest surviving indigenous society on Earth.

Permaculture

Australian ecologist Bill Mollison and his student David Holmgren coined the word "permaculture" from the terms "permanent agriculture" and "permanent culture." Permaculture involves integrating living spaces and food production into the landscape. This is done by designing human and nonhuman communities that support each other: the land gives a maximum yield for human needs, and the inhabitants make use of sustainable land management techniques that mimic the patterns and operations of natural systems. For example, a small, well-placed pool of water will attract birds and insects that eat harmful bugs, making certain plant sprays unnecessary. Heaps of stones provide habitats for snakes that eat destructive gophers. Multi-use plants, composting, mulching, trellising, swaling, wind-breaking, and companion planting work together with energy-saving structures, waste water management, and soil replenishment methods to keep the human-nonhuman community in balance.

In a typical permaculture plan ("typical" is not really the correct word because each plan conforms to the needs of particular people and places), a plot of ground is divided into zones: residence as Zone 0, the space around it as Zone 1, and so forth. As in the natural world, elements or components of each zone are arranged to work together. Gray water from the sinks runs out of the house into an adjacent garden; leaves falling from nearby trees provide natural mulch and frost cover to an adjacent crop. Zones are concentric circles for element placement; sectors are pathways by which natural forces like wind and sunlight flow from outside toward Zone 0. A multiuse windbreak that softens frosty breezes while providing shade and a home for birds is an example of imitating nature's many-dimensional wisdom by arranging elements in zones to manage sector energies.

Arranging human habitations like this evokes certain ethical principles: namely, conscious care for people and planet, limits set to population and consumption, generous redistribution of surpluses. In David Holmgren's vision of permaculture, design principles ramify outward into at least seven dimensions: land and nature stewardship, built environment, tools and technologies, culture and education, health and spiritual well-being, finance and economics, and land tenure and community governance, all integrated into carefully planned arrangements that sustain the natural world while supporting human life. Many permaculturalists also share the bioregional vision of self-determination—Bill Mollison, for instance:

We know how to solve every food, clean energy, and sensible shelter problem in every climate; we have already invented and tested every necessary technique and technical device, and have access to all the biological material that we could ever use....The tragic reality is that very few sustainable systems are designed or applied by those who hold power, and the reason for this is obvious and simple: to let people arrange their own food,

energy, and shelter is to lose economic and political control over them. We should cease to look to power structures, hierarchical systems, or governments to help us, and devise ways to help ourselves.

One of Mollison's favorite activities is to turn ecologically devastated sites into permaculturally productive ones, starting with using what's at hand to grow new soil. Other permaculture practices:

- Zones are laid out from the center (the dwelling) in terms of how many daily visits we need to make or do something in each zone: the more visits it needs, the closer in it should be. Sector energies coming toward the house can be shielded, deflected, or collected (ponds, banks, hedges, walls, screens, trellises, hedges).
- Just as landscape elements are placed to serve two or more functions (a tree for shade and for erosion control) while managing sector energies (blocking rough winds), every function (water collection, fire protection, etc.) is served in two or more ways.
- Water--drainage, collection, availability--is the chief design consideration. Storage sources can be placed on a slope above the site for gravity feeding downward. Roofs can collect rainwater in covered drums. Wire fences drip dew on the plants below.
- Everything is useful and has something to teach. Pests tell something about soil and plant problems. Frogs are drawn to clean water. Predators manage the pests.
- Principle of Stability: it is not the number of diverse things in a design that leads to stability, but the number of beneficial connections between these components.
- Edge cropping: the skillful use of area margins, which tend to be sites of diversity and productivity.

- Mollison's Prime Directive of Permaculture: "The only ethical decision is to take responsibility for our own existence and that of our children. Make it now."

To the image of self as ecosystem analog permacultural metaphors and methods bring the dimension of "second nature" human cleverness by virtue of which we make our surroundings more comfortable for ourselves. Margins and edges where interesting things happen, as at the borders of conscious and unconscious; weeds and varmints as the organic equivalents of complexes; energies and forces channeled intelligently: such metaphors connect us more imaginatively with the world from which mind springs than the assemblies of circuits and drives we keep inflicting on ourselves.

Lest the therapeutic impact of permaculture seem obscure, think about how much less stress you would feel if you knew that should your current means of support disappear, you would still have the knowledge to provide your own food, transportation, clothing, energy, and housing. You could live within the system but without having to rely on it totally.

A permaculture maxim tells us that when we think there are too many pests, there are actually not enough predators to eat them. Seeing it this way keeps us from introducing interventions that could unbalance a self-regulating system even further. A hint for the psychotherapist!

Ecopsychology

Before going on to the end, a brief recap:

Ecology, environmental and ecological psychology, and conservation psychology all study the relationship of mind to environment, but remain embedded in the objectivist-empirical view of how to do science. Deep ecology pushes over the edge by questioning the paradigm itself, as do social ecology and ecofeminism in more political terms. Bioregionalism and permaculture offer cultural and techno-agrarian models, respectively, for rejoining human consciousness to its places of origin. But does any perspective examine the relationship *psychologically*

, meaning: with psychological tools and ideas that work closely with actually lived

experience?

Psychologist Robert Greenway had been talking with a group of scholars about something called “psychoecology” since 1963. While a graduate student at Brandeis he had worked with psychologist Abraham Maslow and heard Erik Erikson, Rollo May, Carl Rogers, and Aldous Huxley speak about their work. With Art Warmouth and other scholars in the “psychoecology” group, discussion wandered through Jung, Piaget’s developmental psychology, Karen Horney’s brand of psychoanalysis, theories of the philosopher-educator John Dewey, Paul Shepard, John Steinbeck’s California, the ego psychologist Heinz Hartmann, the “I-Thou” of Martin Buber, Paul Goodman, who had written about community and urban planning, and Gregory Bateson, who was working on systems theory. (I would include shamanism, but I would then have to explain how it looks in its cultures of origin, whereas in California, half of us think banging drums and going to esoteric workshops makes us shamans. Allan Watts started this unfortunate trend while drinking himself to death on a houseboat in Sausalito.) By 1968, Greenway had relocated to the Bay Area and was conducting wilderness excursions with his students at Sonoma State.

In 1990, Mary Gomes, an assistant professor of psychology at Holy Names College in Oakland, convened a multidisciplinary study group in Berkeley to discuss what would evolve into the *psychological* study of our relations with our surroundings. Greenway was one of the participants, as was psychologist Allen Kanner and environmental consultant and educator Elan Shapiro. Environmental science, the deep and transpersonal psychologies, wilderness work, the role of research: it was all on the table for rebuilding broken inner and outer connections.

Theodore Roszak heard about this group while writing the seminal book *The Voice of the Earth* (1992), which explained the need for what was eventually called *ecopsychology*, a bridge spanning the psychological and the ecological, person and place, environment and self, mental health and planetary integrity. A barrier had finally gone down between the healer’s ear and a wounded world.

Once upon a time, all psychologies were “ecopsychologies.” Those who sought to heal the soul took it for granted that human nature is densely embedded in the world we share with animal, vegetable, mineral, and all the unseen powers of the cosmos....It is peculiarly the psychiatry of modern Western society that has split the “inner” life from the “outer”

world—as if what was inside of us was not also inside the universe, something real, consequential, and inseparable from our study of the natural world.

To imagine a paradigm of inner healing that could explore the self in its environmental context meant pushing beyond the boundaries of the narcissistic introversion with which Freud had spellbound psychotherapy. Ecopsychology aimed to serve the dual function of criticizing the cultural, social, and historical arrangements that authorize and support injury to self and world while taking us to the root of who we are as humans situated in a more-than-human setting.

To this end a new collection of thoughtful papers, edited by Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner, was published in 1995: *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. The book contains an impressive array of new ideas, fertile thoughts, wilderness encounters, sorrowful reflections on the declining health of the planet, and useful examples for reattaching affective ties to the natural world.

In the book's Environmental Foreword, agricultural economist Lester R. Brown sketched in a goal pursued by the new/old field:

At its most ambitious, ecopsychology seeks to redefine sanity within an environmental context. It contends that seeking to heal the soul without reference to the ecological system of which we are an integral part is a form of self-destructive blindness....In simple terms, we cannot restore our own health, our sense of well-being, unless we restore the health of the planet.

The goal gains substance through practice: conducting rituals of mourning for vanishing species, incorporating plants, animals, the landscape, and the body into a counseling session ("ecotherapy"), leading vision quests, tracking a landscape's signature through literature, analyzing nature-based philosophies, unearthing the emotional dynamics behind ecocidal behavior, pointing out the pathologies and dangers in lifestyles of unchecked consumption, correlating data on the disproportion of minority communities exposed to toxic waste.

If you cage a species like ours in a world of artifacts in which it was never designed to dwell, what happens? A *techno-addiction* that anesthetizes the “original wound” of shock and emptiness, observed Chellis Glendinning, while only making them worse. Greed, cites physicist and activist Vandana Shiva, coiner of the term “maldevelopment,” from her knowledge of the shadow of industry in India. Intense psychic isolation, adds activist writer Jerry Mander, as we forget that by ringing ourselves in surfaces and circuits, we live shut away inside our own externalized minds. Buddhist and systems theorist Joanna Macy's haunting term for this destructive loop of alienation is *environmental despair*

. To work with it, Macy and philosopher John Seed designed a Council of All Beings to breach the denial numbing us to the pain of the natural world. The Council also fosters revisualization of our rootedness in that world and promotes “thinking like a mountain” and rituals of reconnection to land, plants, and animals. Mary Gomes directed an “Altars of Extinction” project at Sonoma State to move beyond collective denial to mourn the animal and insect life that will never return. For environmental education professor David Orr, teaching “ecological literacy” could take another constructive step toward remembering our place in a world under daily attack by the inadequately restrained capitalism also attacked by Murray Bookchin.

A particularly urgent task for ecopsychology is to understand and address the impulsivity, recklessness, denial, and spoiled-child irresponsibility increasingly obvious in “First” World behavior toward the environment. In politics it remains disturbingly flagrant. Ecological philosopher Paul Shepard believed that fully adult humanness depends on consistent contact with the nonhuman world; he coined the term *ontogenetic crippling* for the collective but individually expressed immaturity resulting from the loss of Earth-based rites of passage used by primal cultures. Cut off from extended exposure to the natural world that evolved us, raised without villages of loving caregivers, and uninitiated into full psychological adulthood by wise elders, the once-natural sense of secure attachment to people and place gives way to a pervasive mood of emptiness and exile covered over by a macho exterior, an envious fear of the undomesticated, and an obsession with control. What were a minority of spoiled paranoiacs back in the Fertile Crescent have become the majority members of entire cultures too distracted and reckless to care about long-term impacts on personal and planetary health. For Gomes and Kanner, this lingering immaturity often surfaces in the angry reactions directed at concerns about the health of the ecosphere. “When environmentalists suggest that humans respect the integrity of uninhabitable or unwelcoming lands, they provoke outrage similar to that expressed by a domineering husband whose wife decides, without his permission, to spend her Friday nights at, say, a women's ritual circle.” Bumper sticker appeals to “Love Your Mother” (writes Catherine Roach) merely recall the boy too immature to care about his mother's needs or see past the childish illusion of her inexhaustibility.

Another task has to do with addressing the widespread dissociation that enables the

continued destruction of the natural world and the parallel disintegration of human community. Depth psychologist Laura Mitchell observes that

These dominant mythologies of thinking—an anthropocentric world, a secularized promised land, unlimited progress, a triumphalist futurity of complete domination over the natural order and our natural instincts—prevent us from facing suffering. They require denial, disavowal, repression, and psychic numbing to keep their belief systems intact. The consequence to us is the inability to experience the actual suffering these narratives result in: the suffering of earth, the suffering of place, the suffering of our human and nonhuman communities, and our own suffering.

She adds:

I think about the way we are spiraling out of ecological control and the concomitant disturbance in the way we are entwined in the imaginal fabric of our home communities, an invisible renting of human-nature bindings. I feel this rent reverberate in my own body like the sound of a deadening rush of footsteps going nowhere or an oncoming army, a speeded sense of urgency in a void. I began wondering how the landscape and habitat of a home community inform the collective identity, and how this tear in ecological viability affects us, and what new frameworks of thinking can bring such events into our ken. As I move along the pathway, the storied existence of this ridge comes into relief: the sensorial surround of smell, sound, texture, sight, and rhythm open up the immediacy of the living landscape. Yet it is my sense of intimacy and ‘attachment’ that makes me part of, that weaves me into the landscape, particularizing and intensifying these moments—an attachment that is continually relinquished and returned back to the other, that cannot be possessed.

By converting discomforts resistant to therapy or medication into conscious distress (or pockets of immaturity) to be understood and worked through, grounded, reflective ecopsychologies have demonstrated how “personal” tribulations and oases of “inner” health reflect those of the world reaching around and below to within. This hardy, courageous, and often joyful knowing could pass for a workable definition of wisdom, which perhaps is another word for human maturity at its unenclosed ripest.

Speaking conceptually, it is important to understand that ecopsychology was designed from the first as an integrative perspective large enough to include both qualitative/inner and quantitative/outer forms of inquiry, such as environmental psychology and ecology surface and deep, for use in the individual, collective, and environmental spheres. It has not always performed so in practice, but its sturdy and yet flexible framework-collage rose from serious, continual reflection on many different disciplines, methods, viewpoints, ideas, and sources of knowledge both contemporary and ancient. To do ecopsychology and *ecotherapy*, one of its healing-directed applications, is to practice art, lore, craft, ethics, philosophy, and science simultaneously, emphasizing now one, now another, and often many together.

Nevertheless, a lingering disconnection between the unheard “sound” or “sense” of place and the human researcher’s responses to it continued to remain unaddressed. As creative as they often were, ecopsychological responses to the world’s doings have tended to focus on the human side of the self-world divide, thereby keeping us from enlisting the world as a full research partner. Nor has ecopsychology offered a deeper way to understand the psychic-collective undercurrents of how we came to be at such destructive odds with the rest of the ecosphere.

Terrapsychology

We have now reached the last stage of our descent (or ascent, as the case may be) into self/nature perspectives from the highly literal to the highly symbolic. For our last perspective to make sense I need to touch briefly on how symbolism shows up psychologically.

The heavy blend of mythological obscurity and psychoanalytic propaganda laid over the origins of modern psychotherapy make it difficult to know exactly who first realized that outer events can carry a high symbolic charge. It may have been Pierre Janet, who traced the symptoms of “hysteria” to life traumas and who developed what we now know was a truly dynamic system of psychology. Or it may have been Andries Hoek and his patient Rika van B., who worked together in Holland on the hypnotic catharsis of emotional wounding as early as 1851. In any case psychoanalytic investigations have amply confirmed that at deep “primary process” levels of unconscious fantasy, externals take on a symbolic sheen and become metaphors of relational dynamics. What the symbols mean has been a matter of hot contention (does a snake represent a phallus? a rebirth? a prod out of Edenic unconsciousness?); the existence of the symbolizing function is not. Verification of it lies as near at hand as a Freudian slip, an impressionistic work of art, a symptom, or a dream image.

It was the genius of Kurt Lewin to depict such symbolizations as operative within a person's life space: that geographical counterpart to philosopher Edmund Husserl's ideas about experiential "sedimentation" in the intersubjective "life-world." The things and spaces around and below us form parts of the psychological field. Yet how deeply they reach into us has remained curiously uninvestigated, no doubt due to our cultural tendency to see the "inner" world as autonomous. To realize that features of the "outer" world might operate at times with the impact of unconscious forces moving in a *transferential* field might wound some of our customary narcissism, disturb the sleep of Descartes, puncture the psychic bubble we live in.

Several years ago I lived in a Southern Californian neighborhood through which I liked to walk almost daily just before dusk. Upon adjusting my route I began walking by an old red house standing in a barren field. It was dilapidated; perhaps the residents had little money. A large black dog barked fiercely every time I went by until the day the house stood deserted, with some of its furniture and carpets removed and pushed into a pile nearby. The former residents must have come back for something, because the next time I went by I saw a large painting of Sesame Street's Kermit the Frog propped in front of the abandoned home. He held his head sadly in his hands. Quite a final statement from whoever had lived there. It saddened me every time I saw it.

I passed that place for about a year, so I had ample opportunity to watch it change. The Kermit figure always triggered in my head the song phrase, "It's not easy being green" every time I went by until I took conscious note of this, at which point the painting disappeared. A tractor came and knocked down a tree. The house went next, leaving it a pile of rubble on a concrete foundation. I didn't realize this yet, but in addition to possessing their own "beingness," all these things simultaneously symbolized a loss of structure, aspiration, and belonging waiting for me just up ahead in the future. When that future came and went, leaving me feeling displaced and solitary, the empty field, now cleared of rubble, began to show signs of green here and there as the forces of ecological succession moved in bit by bit until a day came when the field was awash in the waving stalks and leaves of hardy pioneer plants. I realized then that it's NOT easy being green, either for an abandoned and desolate field or for a former psychotherapist slowly moving into a new environmental realm of vocational interest. The last time I saw the field it was being prepared for a new home. I left town to move into my own new home.

You can see how I was drawn to a place that loaned outward form to urgent inner transformations. It was as though what the place went through echoed back to me what I was going through. This sort of mutuality seems to be much more frequent than most of us

realize. That being so, it would behoove therapists to ask their clients about what in the immediate environment—at home, at work, in the therapy office itself—catches their interest. If I were still doing therapy I would ask clients to bring digital photographs of these details so we could explore their symbolic meanings. What do the rooms and regions of a house say? What aspirations, what images, what childhood dreams and toys remain stuffed away in the attic out of immediate reach? What hides downstairs, literally and psychically? What lives in the livingroom? What's cooking in the kitchen—or burning, or getting stale? What weeds are busy in the gardens of a life? Where is the pavement too cracked to traverse? How firm are the foundations?

In terms of how mainstream psychology would see these interactions, the explanation would be borrowed from Newtonian physics and linear causality, to wit: I projected my “issues” onto the place in question, where they remained until I “owned” them—buying them back like second-hand real estate, one might say. This rather old-fashioned paradigm would not ask whether it worked the other way around: whether what I experienced symbolized something for, in, or about the place as well. The closest we could come without losing the facade of clinical objectivity might be to suggest that certain things in the world—places, details, objects, and so on—serve not only as transitional objects (substitutes for the childhood mother), but as *selfobjects*, Heinz Kohut's term for those aspects of people we need all our lives for our support and mirroring.

Even this begins to seem an insufficient conceptualization as the interactions grow more complex and the environment more animated. In May of 2003, I woke feverish and sweating from a nightmare in which towers of flame were roaring skyward. The blaze looked something like the firestorm following a nuclear attack. In October another, similar nightmare recurred after a few days spent in a persistent mood of free-floating dread. One week later flames rose in San Diego County, and the largest brush fire in recorded California history was on from the international border to above Santa Barbara. Only when I saw the towers of fire on television did I make the connection with my two fiery nightmares. In this case assuming a certain unconscious sensitivity to the consequences of dry weather made more sense than hypothesizing some sort of projection onto the landscape.

It goes still deeper, this eerily unacknowledged interconnectedness between people and places. One of my students found herself caught in a replay straight out of Sonoma County history, even down to the institution she worked for being named after one of the historical figures caught up in the original event. Another student camped out not far from a bombing range in New Mexico discovered petroglyphs of what looked to him like jets, bombs, and explosions; locals told him ancient stories of how the Thunderbird likes to fly overhead. In my dreams places routinely show up as personified figures who tell me things about themselves. Can causal explanations be found for all this? Perhaps. That's what ecology

and the environmental psychologies are for. What interests us more is the level of interactivity, as though aspects of the surroundings were addressing us continually, especially those we do not wish to hear. I understand now why all pre-industrial peoples everywhere believed that the natural world was alive.

Terrapsychology is the name I have given to the study of these deep symbolic ties between people and places and things, which we trace while keeping an eye on the literal connections too. Its working premises include these:

- Under certain circumstances, features of the environment behave in the transference field like metaphorical aspects of self.
- These aspects in turn reflect happenings in the environment, particularly recurring themes (“placefield motifs”) endemic to a given locale.
- Seeing this as a field effect is more congruent with experience than linear explanations that downplay the startling interactivity of inner and outer.
- Repressing these connections sets up “returns of the ecologically repressed” in which local ecological wounds and personal ones resonate jarringly together: apartment complexes and personal complexes, congested freeways and congested interactions, emotional ups and downs in hilly San Francisco, suicidal depressions near Monterey Bay and its underwater canyons, polluted rivers and polluted moods.
- Tending these symbolic resonances consciously turns them into felt bonds with the locale, its details, its creatures, and ultimately the world.

In practical terms terrapsychology suggests that the logic of self projected onto world can be reversed to good effect, offering a tool for understanding the world more deeply via our *ecological transference* reactions to it. When I can trace the currents of an unnatural-feeling defensiveness and guardedness from my San Diegan relationships back to the city, with its centuries-long

history of borders, fences, guards, and outposts, this tells me something about myself, but it also tells me something about San Diego. What the inner and outer manifestations of this motif all have in common is, of course, the defended place itself.

From the terrapsychological perspective, features of the land (and air, and water) can be reflected upon psychologically insofar as they carry a symbolic/psychic charge. California's San Andreas Fault was named after a small lake named in turn after St. Andrew, who legend says was crucified by being stretched with ropes. Apparently he had protested the conquest of a woman by her husband. In conquered California, named after conquered bride-to-be Queen Calafia, it's as though the fault line runs not only down the coast, but metaphorically quakes its path through the peculiar, statewide division of cities and counties into conservative (east) and liberal (west). The state as a whole is generally "blue" along the coast and "red" in the Central Valley, but the division holds even for counties like Marin. This is one of countless examples of how a geological fact can double as a social and psychological metaphor.

The cultural ancestry of our perspective is quite long, reaching all the way back to when human beings took Earth's animated aliveness as established. Some form of what anthropologists call "animism" probably preceded every other variety of religious experience. Many mountains, valleys, and rivers still bear the names of gods or nature spirits. Terrapsychology's more recent forbears include the Greek image of the *genius loci* or spirit of place; the Neoplatonic image of the *anima mundi* or World Soul; panpsychist philosophy (which assumes psyche to be a dimension of being or subjectivity found everywhere, not just in people's heads); German Romantic and nature philosophy; Goethe's attempts at a natural phenomenology; the alchemical theory of matter's animation and perfectibility; Shinto's description of local beings such as *kami*; Teilard de Chardin's "within" of things; and the animistic thinking of Jung in his later years.

Terrapsychology also examines how certain mythological stories and images seem to favor certain landscapes. La Llorona, the Weeping Woman of Mexican folklore, often shows up—in art, in dreams, in local repeats of her tragic tale, in reports of ghostly sightings—in conquered territories, as though the land itself were weeping imaginally as well as suffering ecologically. The titanic figure of innovative Prometheus, mythic bringer of fire and creator of the human form, has long occupied Switzerland, site of the modern CERN particle laboratory rearranging matter within eyeshot of where Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* and her husband composed *Prometheus Unbound*.

. Locally, the Garden of Eden myth has surfaced in the crossroads town of Sebastopol, with its abundant apples, Eves in sandals and colorful wrap skirts, bearded Adams, and cherubim sculptures, one of which wears wings and bears a plaque to announce, "I am the Guardian of the Gate."

Whatever the ultimate nature of such symbolic connections, stories, histories, motifs, moods, and memories once held together by their landscapes no longer enjoy the seamless continuity they did in times gone by. Where bioregionalism speaks of reinhabitation, deep ecology of identification, and permaculture of integrated design systems, terrapsychology suggests a deep practice for people unable or unwilling to stay in one place as well as for those who can and do: *heartsteading*, or getting to know a place both outwardly (its history, terrain, climate, and so on) and inwardly by staying in interpretive dialog with its "voice" or spirit as manifested in local stories and folklore, dreams, ecological transference, repeats of past events, and the like. Heartsteaders dwell among the contours, creatures, and creases of a place as though among semi-autonomous facets of the personality: geographies become imaginal without ceasing to be geographies. Terrapsychological Inquiry, a prototype research method for doing this more systematically, debuts in my book *Terrapsychology: Reengaging the Soul of Place*, to be published this January by Spring Journal Books.

As we have considered various environmental perspectives in relation to how they touch on human psychology, we have straddled a San Andreas fault line of our own between inner and outer, person and place, subjective and objective, quantitative and qualitative. The deeper we go, the more difficult it becomes to pry these poles of experience apart. As a kind of mental shorthand, I sometimes think of them as expressions of the Valhallic and Nirvanic tendencies in the collective psyche, with the first favoring an individualized, technique-driven approach of the kind that stormed out of the Fertile Crescent and sped around the globe, and the second emphasizing story, community, and complex inner development. Neither of these trends has stood still over the past eleven thousand years, but neither have they been successfully rejoined except here and there. Perhaps that is the task of our historical period. Certainly it is our opportunity, and perhaps a necessity for our survival.

This split runs through psychology too, of course, with its psychiatric research arm counting up numbers, pills, and facts and its psychotherapeutic arm accumulating the experiential wisdom of who knows how many client-therapist encounters. Whether the field of psychology will one day work as an integrated field I could not venture to guess, but my intuition tells me that it cannot until it confronts the split running below all the others: the arbitrary and increasingly destructive separation of human consciousness from its ground and source.

source: <http://www.terrapsych.com/mindandenvironment.html>