The Rediscovery of Ecopsychology

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Emotional knowing is as important, and sometimes more important, than conceptual knowing, especially if we need to summon psychic energy to meet the ecological crisis that we currently face.

(Tacey, 2009, p. 11)

A little over a year ago, I received a query from a person who was fact-checking a story about ecopsychology for a popular US health and lifestyle magazine. She rightly noted that ecopsychology was a highly interdisciplinary field, and hoped I could speak from, in her words, "the psychiatric side" of things and confirm that the specialty emerged when therapists began to notice their patients' increasing stress about the greenness of their lifestyles and various environmental crises.

This was certainly plausible but not entirely true, I informed her, because people have been exploring ecopsychology for some years (the term itself being popularized in the early 1990s). I believed it was more accurate to say that the recent focus in US culture on sustainability and green lifestyles, fueled in part by extensive media coverage of issues such as climate change and peak oil, had created a sense that "greenness" and environmental awareness were the mainstream. In this context, it could be expected that people might evaluate their lives and experience stress if they discovered that they were not meeting the emerging sustainability norm. Because of all this, ecopsychology was back in the limelight. And a good thing, too, I added, because there were now more resources available for people in this regard.

She thanked me and shared a revised statement that described ecopsychology emerging when the therapists noticed ideas of sustainability and environmental awareness becoming the mainstream. Sensing—perhaps too enthusiastically—a teachable moment, I again followed up and observed that her statement made sense: Eco-ideas + Go mainstream = Ecopsychology emerges. But, unfortunately, this was not true. I spared her a lesson on correlation and causation and did not go into a longer psychology lesson, although I maintained that ecopsychology predated the recent phenomenon of what we might call popular sustainability by at least a decade and a half, and that ideas and philosophies that inform ecopsychology (and its debates) have been around for much longer, some being ancient and endemic to civilization. Ecopsychology has experienced a rediscovery of sorts in the press as the evidence mounts about health impacts of environmental degradation; the conversation then naturally turns to coping and healing. Holistic and intuitively compelling ecopsychology ideals are no longer just for stereotypical "tree-hugger" types. Put yet in another way: Along with sustainability and environmental awareness, the experience of ecopsychology (apprehending the relationship between human mental health and well-being and the health of the natural environment) has become the mainstream.

I never heard if the story was published and a recent search of the publication did not turn up the term "ecopsychology." But the conversation was familiar to me: Given the state of the world, ecopsychology makes sense. There *is* a teachable moment. Those who do not carry some intellectual baggage about the term "ecopsychology"—which is most people outside of psychology or academia—are likely to find the idea novel, intriguing, and even affirming.

The Figure-and-Ground Problem in Ecopsychology

The energy that drove the initial wave of ecopsychology was that of critique. Ecopsychology was seen as a corrective: (1) challenging the environmental movement to file a "psychological impact statement" (Brown, 1995, p. xiv) and to be more psychologically savvy about the use of fear-based, lecturing meth-

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ods; (2) augmenting the perceived reductionist environmental psychology of the day with depth, emotion, advocacy, and therapeutic insights; and (3) calling out mainstream psychology and psychiatry for ignoring the biospheric ground of all human life and experience. If ecopsychology is inherently critical, what happens when the focus of ecopsychology's critiques evolves? With my students, I call this the "figure-and-ground problem" of ecopsychology. If ecopsychology is the figure, what is the ground on which it bases its theory and praxis?

It is telling to look back at the popular media and the contents of publications like the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* or *Environment and Behavior* in 1992 (the year Roszak's *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* was published) to see how far things have come. I am reminded of Eliot's lines in *Four Quartets* about the end of our exploring being "to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" (1944/1994, p. 43).

Social constructionist theorists have long-identified flaws in some of ecopsychology's taken-for-granted ways of describing nature and wilderness (Cronon, 1995; Proctor, 2001) setting the stage in ecopsychology for the integrative "critical realism" of Kidner (2001, p. 22) that allows for a simultaneous awareness of our cultural stories and the natural order on which they rest, or the "psychopolitical validity" of Prilleltensky and Fox (2007, p. 801), that helps clarify the often-obscured relationship between wellness and social justice.

Recognition that humans have indelibly shaped our atmosphere and climate has recently led geologists to consider our geologic epoch the "anthropocene" (Crutzen, 2002; Zalasiewicz et al., 2008). Politically, we are in a time of postenvironmentalism (e.g., Nordhaus & Shellenberger, 2007). Despite some rear-guard actions, dismissal of environmental issues as being merely those of special interest groups is increasingly untenable. The move toward substantive climate change legislation in the United States has prompted a open debate among some of the nation's largest corporations about environmental accountability (Hiskes, 2009). At the same time, questions are raised about what makes happiness and the good life (e.g., the research of Tapia Granados & Diez Roux, 2009, documenting improvements in population health and increases in life expectancy during economic downturns—including the years of the Great Depression—and concomitant declines in life expectancy during periods of strong economic expansion).

Though simplistic straw-man arguments that portrayed environmental psychologists as cold-blooded empiricists and ecopsychologists as hotheaded romantics were never accurate (see the inclusive early environmental psychology of Proshansky, Ittelson, & Rivlin, 1970, and the prescient psychoanalytic perspective of Searles, 1972), they are particularly dated now. In fact, many of the novel and revolutionary ideas emanating from ecopsychology are now taken for granted. A connection between mental health and the environment, as a general proposition, is accepted by the psychological and social work establishment (e.g., Clark, 2008; Kazdin, 2009), medicine (Costello et al., 2009), and even specialized branches of psychiatry (Young, 2009). It is no longer taboo to have a biocentric value focus in psychology; Clayton and Brook (2005) explicitly ask: Can psychology help save the world? Stokols, Misra, Runnerstrom, and Hipp (2009) see global threats to personal and societal well-being as constituting "an age of ecological crisis" (p. 181). Uzzell and Rathzel's (2009, p. 344) "transformational environmental psychology" challenges environmental psychology to focus its analysis on political institutions and the means of production in consumer society and, echoing deep ecologists, to strive for a "strong sustainability" (p. 5) in which nature is valued in its own right.

What if Ecopsychology Were "Invented" Today?

All this begs the question: What would ecopsychology look like if it were "invented" today? What would be its value proposition? Despite its flaws, the project of ecopsychology is still the most promising place to integrate the body of knowledge available from psychotherapy, clinical and counseling psychology, and social work with environmental psychology. Ecopsychology also continues to provide a venue for innovative and environmentally focused work drawn from humanistic, psychoanalytic, Jungian, transpersonal, and critical psychology traditions—see Tacey's (2009, p. 29) recent attempts to delineate a "postrational" vision that returns a sense of spiritual meaning and value to the world without resorting to prerational superstition and projection.

And, now that cognitive and social factors affecting environmentally relevant behaviors are being clarified (e.g., APA Task Force Report, 2009, in particular, Section 5: "Which Psychological Barriers Limit Climate Change Action," p. 123), ecopsychology brings a needed focus on emotion, which represents the next wave in environmental psychology. Examples of this emotionally intelligent work include Nicholson (2001, see interview this issue) and Randall's timely and sophisticated revisioning of the process of grief, loss, and transformation associated with climate change (2009, this issue).

In terms of a journal, it would be this wide-ranging publication, *Ecopsychology*, designed to be a forum for diverse ideas that inform, support, develop, and refute the idea of an earth-centric

psychology, with all its ramifications. This includes knowledge drawn from theory, empirical research, professional practice, the arts, embodied experience, and spiritual reflection.

Our Current Issue

Our interview is with psychoanalyst Shierry Weber Nicholsen, author of *The Love of Nature and the End of the World* (2002). In a wide-ranging discussion, Nicholson describes how her background in philosophy, the arts, psychoanalysis, and trauma work contributed to her nuanced writings on emotions regarding environmental degradation in the late 20th century. Nicholsen illustrates the normative and problematic ways in which emotions about the natural environment may arise in the course of psychotherapy, and the importance of creating a containing function to bring attention to unconscious basic assumptions present in groups and organizations. She describes her work with environmental change agents and the development of the innovative "Environment and Community program" at Antioch University in the 1990s. Finally, Nicholsen talks about how her current pursuits of stone-carving and mastering the cello provide ongoing lessons about patience and being a beginner at this stage of her life.

In *Loss and climate change: The cost of parallel narratives*, Rosemary Randall addresses the parallel and often disconnected narratives present in public discourse regarding climate change: images of a catastrophic future paired with mundane rhetoric of small steps, market transformation, and technological rescue. Randall analyzes case studies drawn from the Cambridge, UK Carbon Conversations program, using a psychoanalytic framework of grief and loss. Randall illustrates how an intellectual acceptance of the reality of climate change can mask underlying denial about its emotional ramifications, and how the process of working through grief and loss can be derailed through negative responses such as idealizing the past or lapsing into hopelessness and withdrawal. Randall calls for a more sophisticated understanding of the processes of loss and mourning, which will allow them to be restored to public climate narratives and help release energy for realistic and lasting programs of change. She concludes with examples of individuals who are moving through the grief and loss process toward a reinvesting of emotional energy in ecologically stable life choices.

In *Addressing barriers to changing environmentally relevant behaviors: Toxic chemicals as a case study*, Susan M. Koger surveys the wide-ranging health impacts and social justice, economic, ecological, and social factors inherent in the use of chemicals in consumer products. Koger demonstrates ways to integrate an ecopsychological perspective with psychological research on effective ways to alter environmentally relevant behaviors. This includes addressing barriers to reducing chemical exposure, including the ubiquity of neurotoxic, endocrine disruptive, and carcinogenic substances in general use and a tendency to focus on short-term risks. Koger also describes incentives including personal safety and intrinsic values; the creation of persuasive information messages, such as framing the issue of toxic chemicals as a public health epidemic rather than an environmental issue; providing accurate and useful information about alternatives; securing a commitment to change; and utilizing social norms and support.

In *Ecopsychology and social work: Creating an interdisciplinary framework for redefining person-in-environment*, Christine Lynn Norton outlines an integration of social work principles and ecopsychology, focusing on relational-cultural theory as a theoretical bridge. Norton describes how the person-in-environment paradigm underlying social work can be revisioned in the contemporary context, leading to a redefinition of a client's life-space to include the natural world. In expanding relational-cultural theory to foster inclusivity of the natural world, Norton describes strategies of connection, such as deep empathy and mutual or cross-species empowerment. These are distinguished from strategies of disconnection, such as detachment from and domination of the natural world, that serve to minimize or avoid vulnerability. Norton details the applications of her ecopsychology integration for social work in terms of macro-, mezzo-, and micro-levels of intervention. Norton also believes that ecopsychology can learn from social work's history of focusing on social justice issues, use of a strengths perspective, and focus on mutual empathy and empowerment.

Offering an international perspective, Oksana Yakushko introduces the teachings of Ukrainian folk healer and environmental sage Porfiriy K. Ivanov, interpreted through the lens of depth psychology. Yakushko describes the nature–connection practices promoted by Ivanov, such as cold water bathing, mindfulness meditation, abstinence from addictive substances, regular fasting, and conscious cultivation of a positive connection with the Earth and other species, combined with efforts to conquer personal vices such as greed and pride. Yakushko describes how Ivanov's teachings continue to have a following in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and makes connections between these folk practices and contemporary ecotherapy.

In her essay, *Strands: Weaving a mythopoietics of place*, Joy Greenberg finds indigenous oral traditions to provide the basis for a contemporary bioregional narrative for her home region on the coast of Southern California, USA. Greenberg evokes the

numinous experience of immersing oneself experientially in an inspirited seaside landscape. Greenberg makes reference to the origin stories of the local Chumash people, as well as modern incursions like a naval base, as she reflects on the role of place in her life, identity, and evolving environmental ethics.

In his provocative opinion piece, *Oil addiction: Diagnosis, not metaphor?,* Christopher Bailey reflects on the central role of oil and fossil fuels in the modern infrastructure and in policy making by applying the criteria for substance dependence found in the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Bailey asserts that the United States as a society demonstrates criteria of addiction to fossil fuels such as tolerance, unsuccessful efforts to cut down on substance use, reduction of important health activities, and continued substance use despite persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problems. Following on his addiction metaphor, Bailey goes on to recommend potential treatments for this "disorder," including detoxification using an alternative substance (energy source), rehabilitation supported by incentives, support for readjusting to a lifestyle absent the abused substance, and relapse prevention with abstinence from fossil fuels reframed as a new form of self-reliance and patriotism.

Our issue concludes with two book reviews. George S. Howard discusses Bill McKibben's *Deep Economy* in the context of other works that have addressed the transition to a sustainable economy such as Kunstler's *The Long Emergency* and Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful*. Howard appreciates being, in his words, "McKibbenized" with a hopeful and clearheaded vision of the future. Lisa Lynch then leads off a multi-author review of *Ecotherapy: Healing With Nature in Mind* edited by Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist. The reviewers, including Martin Jordan, Sandra Newes, and myself, comment on the volume from our perspectives as psychotherapists, scholars, and educators.

Next Steps: A Special Issue on Well Being and Sustainability

We look forward to Issue 4, a special issue of *Ecopsychology* on "Emotional Well-being and Sustainable Behaviors" that will explore topics such as psychological need satisfaction, personal well-being, and ecological sustainability; how positive emotions inspire environmentally responsible behaviors; how young Puerto Rican activists develop environmental identity through mentoring younger children; conservation volunteers' connection to nature; and attention benefits of walking in natural settings.

As the journal matures, we look forward to revisiting some of the core principles associated with ecopsychology and reframing them into questions that can be explored in the Journal. These may include focusing on the status and role of women in the context of environmental issues and the importance of feminine principles in ecological thought; psychodynamic perspectives on environmental behaviors and the construct of an ecological unconscious; the utility of systems theory and systems-based interventions in promoting environmental sustainability; an empirical exploration of psychopathology and psychotherapy related to human-nature interactions; and the experience and benefits of embodied and sensuous participation in wild nature.

Thank you for supporting this new journal. There is so much more we can talk about.

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