

Ecopsychology Enters its Second Year

Thomas Joseph Doherty

“A central assumption of ecopsychology is that the outer world of the environmental crisis and the cultural and political processes that support it influence our most intimate personal experiences and feelings. In turn, our states of mind find expression in the way that we relate to the natural world. The outer and inner worlds reflect and support one another, which means that a healthy ecosystem is inseparable from a healthy psyche.”

Gomes (1998, p.7)

What constitutes a healthy ecosystem and whether a healthy ecosystem is inseparable from a healthy psyche is an open and pressing question, a *lived question*, that each person reading these words can embody. Is an ecologically grounded conception of mind, emotion, behavior, and identity (or, in more holistic terms, the psyche) a case of nature or nurture? Is there something essential in this or is this rather a cultural construction? In what sense is an *eco-psychology* necessary, strategic, or even irrelevant or counter-productive? These questions constitute much of the work of this journal. I can report that ecopsychology as a theory, philosophy, and social movement endures, continuing to spark curiosity, self-reflection, and dialog—witness the recent New York Times coverage (Smith, 2009), Buzzell’s ecotherapy column in the online Huffington Post,¹ and the new *European Journal of Ecopsychology*.²

I am also proud to report that *Ecopsychology* begins its second year with this issue. As fitting for this interdisciplinary journal, our content ranges from the psychological to the socio-political, and from the spiritual to popular culture. Original articles examine the psychological benefits of walking, eco-spiritual approaches to social work, and critical ecological approaches to youth development and mentoring. Our roundtable discussion focuses on the role of religious institutions in fostering ecological sustainability. An essay explores the psychological ramifications of the movie *Avatar*. Our reviewers discuss works on conservation psychology and Jungian approaches to ecological consciousness.

Our Current Issue

The roundtable discussion in this issue comes courtesy of the editors of *Sustainability: The Journal of Record* who convened a

gathering of representatives of religious institutions in the United States and Canada to discuss the question, “What is the role of religious institutions in fostering ecological sustainability?” Topics for debate included organized religion’s appropriate role regarding the natural environment, whether there is a textual basis for faith-based involvement, and practical measures that religious leaders and congregants can take to foster sustainability in their faith communities. The dialog topics ranged from the philosophical to the practical, and from the mountaintops of Appalachia to college campuses. As editor of *Ecopsychology*, I hope that this dialog helps spark a more explicit discussion of religious and spiritual topics in our journal.

In *Restoring Mental Vitality in an Endangered World: Reflections on the Benefits of Walking*, psychologist Raymond De Young explains how the act of walking in a park-like setting helps to restore mental vitality and the ability to direct one’s attention—which in turn has benefits for problem solving, planning, emotional regulation, and coping. In an article that is especially suited for individuals who are not familiar with the findings of environmental psychology, De Young provides an accessible summary of research on directed attention fatigue, attention restoration, and the cognitive and emotional benefits of contact with nearby nature—parks, gardens, and common green spaces.

De Young sees walking as a “prototype behavior” (p. 18) for nature restoration. He distills theory and research into an intriguing prescription for restorative walking—how and when to walk, who to walk with, and ways to reduce the need for walks. De Young proposes walking as a ready tonic for the stresses associated with sweeping social, economic and environmental transitions such as global climate change and the peaking of fossil fuel production. As DeYoung

notes, "It is essential to allocate adequate time for restoration in order to create the mental conditions under which the hard work of crafting a sustainable existence is accomplished. . . ." (p. 21).

In *Cultivating Youth Pro-Environmental Development: A Critical Ecological Approach*, anthropologist Federico Cintrón-Moscoso describes an ethnographic case study of high school and college age students in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, who work as mentors exploring urban ecological issues with elementary school children. Working from a critical ecological approach, Cintrón-Moscoso asserts that the privileging of individual interventions and outcomes typically associated with ecopsychology and environmental psychology risks isolating individuals from their historical, social, and cultural contexts. Results of the study demonstrate that individual proenvironmental behavior in youth mentors can occur as a consequence of collective action and increased knowledge of the sociopolitical factors that affect their community. Cintrón-Moscoso demonstrates that by caring for and working with elementary school children, young adults learn to behave in ways that are ecologically conscious while, at the same time, fulfilling their perceived social responsibility as mentors and environmental activists.

In *Eco-Spiritual Helping: An Ecological Postmodern Therapy*, Fred Besthorn, Dan Wulff, and Sally St. George continue the development of ecopsychological approaches to social work described by Norton (2009). In their conception of Eco-Spiritual Helping (ESH), the authors link therapeutic practices within social work to spirituality, social justice, and deeper ecological awareness. In the tradition of postmodern and narrative therapies (e.g., White and Epston, 1990) the authors note that it is critical for clients and therapists to pay particular attention to the positive and negative impact that environmental contexts (social, political, cultural) have upon healthy functioning. The authors stress that ESH is neither a discreet therapeutic technique nor a single truth claim regarding the provision of therapeutic services, rather ESH can be seen as a "metanarrative that speaks to the reclamation of relationship—the right to acknowledge and live out of connection, meaning, and community" (p. 26). The authors describe three basic principles of ESH including (1) Intentional and frequent nature connecting practices coupled with a recognition of the value of ecosystem services and the earth's finite carrying capacity, (2) Enabling clients to become more aware of the spiritual or transpersonal dimension of their experience with the natural world, and (3) Assisting clients in adopting lifestyles and belief patterns that focus on contributing to an ecologically and socially just and sustainable society. The authors offer a composite case example that illustrates a scenario that practitioners might en-

counter in their efforts to integrate principles of ESH into psychotherapy.

Much has been written in the popular media about the recent cinema feature, *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) and, in truth, the movie is quite compelling as an eco-Utopian adventure tale and can be creatively mined (pun intended) for its commentaries on immersive technology, science-as-worldview, globalization, militarism, resource extraction, indigenous rights issues, and the experiences of wounded citizen soldiers. In her essay, *Desire, Longing and the Return to the Garden: Reflections on Avatar*, Renee Lertzman examines *Avatar* from an ecopsychological perspective. Lertzman explains how both the content of the film and experience of the viewer mirror the emotional disjunctions experienced in the modern, technologically-mediated world. Lertzman then effectively applies a psychoanalytic object-relations perspective, in particular, the Kleinian notion of the splitting of psyche when confronted with uncomfortable modes of experience. As Lertzman notes: "The affective dimensions of this film, that [lead character] Jake manifests as he is pulled between the two modes of Earthly and Na'vi existence—can be complicated, contradictory, paradoxical and profound—attributes of experiencing contemporary industrial degradation and our own complicity in it." (p. 41).

In the book reviews, Martin Milton reviews *Conservation Psychology: Understanding and Promoting Human Care for Nature* by Susan Clayton & Gene Myers and Betsy Purluss reviews *Edge of the Sacred: Jung, Psyche and Earth* by David Tacey. In her review of *Edge of the Sacred*, Purluss comments on David Tacey's use of Jungian psychology, literary arts, and cultural criticism to examine the encounter of soul or spirit in nature, in his local and native Australian context, and from the perspectives of Western archetypal psychology and Aboriginal cosmology. Purluss finds much that she can identify in Tacey's work though she ends with a caution about looking to native peoples as a means for re-connecting to earth. Martin Milton's reaction to *Conservation Psychology* equates with my own experience of Clayton & Myers' text, personally and as a classroom resource. Milton finds the book particularly strong in its exposition of the epistemological positions, values, and issues of morality that underpin conservation psychology science; and useful in its chapter-wide attention to domestic, managed, and wild nature. Milton also notes a lack of depth in the work's discussion of the therapeutic implications of conservation psychology research, and the rather limited description of ecopsychology—uncharacteristically relying on dated sources (e.g., Reser's critique of first generation ecopsychology writings from the early 1990s).

Next Steps: New Work on Wilderness Therapy, Women, and the Environment

Some of the most powerful and formative lessons that I draw on as a psychologist and psychotherapist are my experiences facilitating wilderness therapy and being a backcountry expedition guide. Thus, I am pleased that we have a number of papers in upcoming issues that explore topics such as theory and outcomes in wilderness-based therapy, the effects of privacy on backcountry experiences, and efforts to catalog patterns of human-nature interactions. I am also pleased to collaborate with *Ecopsychology* editorial board members Lisa Lynch and Britain Scott as they review a number of manuscripts submitted for our upcoming special issue on women and the environment.

I would like to give thanks for the efforts and support of everyone who helped make the first year of *Ecopsychology* a reality, and for the earth's resources and ecosystem services that make it possible for this unfolding dialog to continue.

Notes

¹Linda Buzzell at the Huffington Post: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/linda-buzzell>

²*European Journal of Ecopsychology*: <http://ecopsychology-journal.eu/index.php/EJE>

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