

Ecopsychology and Nature Languages

Thomas Joseph Doherty

“Our efforts to aid do more harm than good. We do best to stand back and regard with awe.”

—Ursula Le Guin describing landscape restoration efforts following the Mt. St. Helen’s eruption (personal communication, May 18, 2010)

“Nobody knows for sure, though, because there’s no record of a hurricane ever crossing paths with a large oil spill.”

—Hurricane, Oil Spill Could Be Troubling Mix. *National Public Radio*, May 21, 2010.

At the time of this writing, environmental scientists are speculating about the damage to coastal marshes and wetlands surrounding the Gulf of Mexico caused by the oil of the Deepwater Horizon spill. They are also entertaining other scenarios. The Atlantic hurricane season is set to begin and a well-timed hurricane could either dilute and dissipate the oil and its toxic properties before it makes landfall or create more extensive damage to already oil-impacted coastal ecosystems—leading to increased erosion and vulnerability to future storms. The effects of hurricanes and large oil spills are categorized as being natural or technological disasters by whether their triggering events are under human control (and thus preventable), by their progression of impacts and recovery, and by the responses to these events. Natural disasters or so-called ‘acts of god’ tend to bring forth altruistic or community-supportive responses while uncertainty and divisiveness (often exacerbated by existing social fissures) are associated with technological disasters. Issues like global climate change—or the catastrophic synergy of a hurricane and an oil spill—blur the distinctions between natural and technological disasters and prompt complex reactions associated with both types of events.

I was reflecting on the psychology of disasters while listening to a dialog between author Ursula Le Guin, poet/naturalist Gary Snyder, and forest ecologist Jerry Franklin commemorating the 20th anniversary of the volcanic eruption of Mount Saint Helens, whose truncated former peak is visible from where I live in the Northwestern United States. I learned that the process of regeneration of the old growth forests surrounding the mountain was immediate and

profound—and it proceeded in ways that ecologists did not anticipate, teaching many lessons about the resilience of that ecosystem. The events at Mt. St. Helen’s taught a hands-off approach: Efforts at salvage and restoration were not as effective as letting the natural processes take their course.

The seeds of a distinction between humankind and the more than human world are found in the earliest stories and myths of western culture and this dichotomy has become the norm in recent centuries. Thus, we are left with profound questions about how to distinguish between nature, humans and human works—whether they concern processes of health or of disaster. In the 21st century, what constitutes nature and a nature language? Contributors to the current issue of *Ecopsychology* address this question in a number of innovative ways.

The work of Peter Kahn, Jolina Ruckert and their colleagues at the University of Washington on *A Nature Language* provides the keystone of our issue. The authors propose a research agenda to create a vocabulary of patterns and interactions between humans, the natural environment and other species. They seek to document these moments in ways that can be articulated, categorized, and preserved, if you will, in a culture increasingly characterized by technologically mediated experience. In our *Ecopsychology* interview, free thinking environmental educator Michael Cohen discusses his experiential methods for facilitating sensory connections with the natural environment and his grassroots efforts to promote dialog about these experiences through his longstanding Internet-based courses. As with all of our interviews, we gain unexpected developmental insights, for example into Michael’s long background in the U.S.

therapeutic camping movement; his upbringing in the progressive, utopian community of Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, New York; and his involvement in the mid-twentieth century folk music scene.

In original papers, such as *Privacy Functions and Wilderness Recreation*, David Cole from the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute and Troy Hall from the University of Idaho describe the effects of another quality of experience, one that is in fact, legally-mandated in designated wilderness areas in the United States: Solitude and privacy. In *The Ecology of Adventure Therapy*, Duncan Taylor and his colleagues at the University of Victoria highlight the integral role of wilderness experiences in adventure therapy theories and practices. Dulce Garcia From the California Institute of Integral Studies focuses on yet another kind of nature language, the communication between horse and rider, and the therapeutic aspects of equine-facilitated psychotherapy and learning, in her paper, *Of Equines and Humans: Toward a New Ecology*. In his study *Lawn Control, Lawn Culture and the Social Marketing of Sustainable Behaviors*, Joseph Dorsey of the University of South Florida–St. Petersburg focuses an analysis on the realm of nearby nature and the cultural preferences and aesthetics regarding grass lawns, and their relation to conservation and sustainability. In *Ecopsychology and the Human Newborn*, Olza Ibone, a child psychiatrist at the Universitario Puerta de Hierro Majadahonda in Madrid and writer Sharon MacDonnell of British Columbia, Canada, explore the earliest of human developmental experiences—medical interventions in birth and early childcare, breast-feeding, and skin-to-skin contact—for their implications for the development of ecological consciousness in the children of urbanized industrial nations. In *The Flame and The Rock*, Robin Recours from the University of Montpellier and his colleagues analyze the reports of the adolescent fans of two of the most popular sports celebrities in France, soccer player Zinedine Zidane and judoka David Douillet to illustrate how their images evoke the elements and metaphors of earth, fire, air, and water. In her

opinion essay, *Engaging with Climate Change Means Engaging with our Human Nature*, UK psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe discusses the mechanisms of psychological defenses such as denial, and experiences of emotions such as guilt and arrogance, as they relate to individuals' experiences of global climate change and the challenges of providing effective leadership for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Looking ahead, guest editors Lisa Lynch from Antioch University, Seattle and Britain Scott from the University of St. Thomas are preparing an upcoming special issue focusing on women the natural environment, that will feature original articles, dialogues, reviews, and an interview with writer Susan Griffith. Robert Greenway is completing a review of Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Michael Zimmerman's *Integral Ecology: Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World*. As always, I am thankful for the efforts of the individuals around the world who contribute to this online dialog, the support of our publisher, and the earth's systems that allow us to undertake our investigations of nature and the psyche. Be well.

REFERENCES

- Hamilton, J. (2010, May 21). Hurricane, Oil Spill Could Be Troubling Mix. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved 5/21/10 at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127036434>.

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