

**Psychology in a New Key:  
Ecopsychology and Ecological Consciousness**

June 8, 2007

Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon

Greetings. To set the context, here it is, June 8, 2007. At this moment on Earth, we humans are facing several crucial questions:

" As we head towards breakdown, what possibilities are emerging for breakthrough? How can each of us open to those possibilities and find our part in the breakthrough?"

Large questions, calling upon us to think and know in new ways. As the chaos theorists teach, when a system reaches the limits of its stability and the status quo becomes unsustainable, the system becomes supersensitive, responsive to very small fluctuations, such as changes in individual and collective values, beliefs, worldviews.

In such times as these, the old ways of thinking no longer work. My husband, Lane, and I have been working in the arena of Ecopsychology and healing for many years now. In our teaching, we use ritual, experiential exercises and poetry to invite new ways of thinking and knowing. Here is a poem that offers guidance for what we are facing in these times. It is by David Wagoner and is based on instructions given by Native elders to young folk who are going into the forest. Poem, "Lost"

This poem is an invitation to step back from our automatic ways of thinking and being in the world, and open to what the larger living systems are calling for from us. From our ["our" = Lane is with me in this work] experience both as teachers of ecopsychology and as psychotherapists who work with individuals and couples, we have come to view both individual and ecological distress in these times within the context of a distorted relationship to - and within - the web of life. Many of us here have been addressing for some time the tendency in this culture to associate personal pain with individual and family pathology without attention to the larger context, or to view problems in the larger context without attention to the realm of consciousness. Our cultural tendency has been to respond to specific symptoms, to "fix" them wherever they are rather than to explore them within the larger context - to see the symptoms as signals that can provide energy and information for expanding our sense of who we are. Opening to these signals as invitations to stand still and allow for the emergence of ecological

consciousness - knowing ourselves as interdependent beings, interconnected within the larger body of the earth as a living system - is the challenge for us all in these times.

With the state of the global environment beginning to come into the foreground as a very big signal, we are being invited to recognize that ecological health is the larger context of human health; they go together as outside-inside. Healthy human functioning in an ecopsychological context includes sustainable and mutually-enhancing relations not just at the intrapersonal level (within humans) or the interpersonal level (among humans) but also at the level of "interbeing" (between humans and the non-human world) (Nhat Hanh, 1987). We "interare" with all that is.

Various observers over the last few decades have pointed to the crippled state of human consciousness as the root cause of our environmental crisis. Modern consciousness in our industrial culture tends to be dominated by the analytical mode, restricted to linear, sequential, mechanical ways of knowing and of experiencing which cut us off from our "larger body," the more-than-human natural world. Einstein referred to this split as an "optical delusion of our consciousness."

To recover from this optical delusion, we need to restore an ecological mode of consciousness, one that includes ways of knowing which are holistic, nonlinear, dynamic and intuitive. Ecological consciousness locates the human psyche or soul within the larger context. As John Davis wrote after a large ecopsychology gathering in 2000, "Ecopsychology is rooted in the nonduality of humans and nature. Human consciousness and the human psyche are expressions of natural processes along with the rest of nature." The task of ecopsychology is restore the experience of interconnectedness and interdependence among psychological, cultural and ecological systems. How is the ecology of human experience--all the perceptions, feelings, thoughts, images, intuitions and actions within and among humans in intimate and social systems--affected by and affecting of the natural ecosystems of which humans are a part? How can we heal the trauma of disconnection and open to the intelligence around us in the living earth?

Our understanding of ecological consciousness was profoundly influenced by Jeannette Armstrong's teachings at the first ecopsychology gathering 15 years ago. She gave us the story of the Okanagan word for insanity, a word which consists of four syllables, each with a different meaning. Okanagan is a spoken language, and which syllable is emphasized depends on the context in which the conversation is taking place. The first syllable means "talking, talking inside your head." The second syllable means "scattered and having no community." The third

syllable means "disconnected from the land." And the fourth syllable means "cut off from your whole Earth part."

Each of these syllables represents an aspect of ecological consciousness. For us, the first syllable emphasizes the importance of restoring diversity in our ways of knowing. Cognitive understanding is joined by intuition, contemplation, resonance, and imagination, by spiritual as well as sensory ways of knowing. The interior, in-between and relational aspects of the world are the focus of attention as well as the exterior, discreet parts. An ecologically conscious approach to phenomena is about opening to their manifestation and resonating with them, opening to the intuitive awareness that we share consciousness with plants, animals, and even rocks. Gary Snyder quotes:

"As the cricket's soft autumn hum is to us, so are we to the trees as are they to the rocks and the hills."

"After years of walking right past it on my way to chores in the meadow, I actually paid attention to a certain gnarly canyon live oak one day. Or maybe it was ready to show itself to me. I felt its oldness, suchness, inwardness, oakness, as if it were my own. Such intimacy makes you totally at home in life and in yourself."

Lane and I have a number of ways to invite students and clients to open to and awaken ecological consciousness, to enable them to remember and re-experience themselves as part of the web of life. The first is to slow down and pay attention to their direct experience. In our great haste in this culture to get wherever it is we imagine we are going, we rush-on-by both the outer world and our inner sense of being. Our embeddedness in community is unattended to, as is our connection to the land, the more-than-human community. And we tend to feel overwhelmed by the problems in the world, not knowing how to attend to the signs of breakdown and participate in the breakthrough - find our "whole-earth part." So in our teaching, we start each class with silence, sitting in a circle with a collection in the middle of rocks, shells, tree branches and other representatives of the more-than-human world. We then read a poem that relates to the teaching of the day, and continue with a go-round where each student has an opportunity to speak, to describe their experience of the teachings.

To further the teaching of ecological identity and consciousness, we have an experiential exercise that we assign to students (and sometimes use with clients) for the semester. Students are invited to allow themselves to "be chosen by" a "natural being" who is part of their daily landscape and then to develop a relationship with that natural being by spending time with it daily throughout the semester. Over the years of teaching, students have had very powerful experiences doing this as a semester assignment.

The first major challenge is slowing down. Students report feeling restless and worried about the time they were wasting, being concerned that they may be seen as crazy for stopping and being still. This exercise asks them to master, in the dominant culture's perspective, the experience of "doing nothing," even though they are being asked to do some very specific things: to slow down, to put aside their habitual ways of rushing through the landscape, to open other ways of knowing. The result of this process of slowing down and spending time each day with a natural being is a different experience of time. Students report that when they have practiced this for awhile, time begins to slow down and they can "appreciate each passing minute." One student reported: "it seems like I spend hours with my being and only minutes at work or doing homework." Another reported that the assignment introduced her to a deeper experience of patience.

The next challenge is to open to the experience of "being chosen" by a natural being, to open to the landscape in a receptive way that allows some being to attract their attention without them doing the choosing. The process of direct knowing that we teach is a form of meditation that Lane has written about called "Opening to the Other." It invites students to practice a receptive mode of being in the present, to allow a being to present itself to them through its display, on its own terms, its own language.

In this culture, that is a major challenge. Students often do not know how to do this, and feel very awkward slowing down enough along their daily routes to allow it to happen. They have reported being very skeptical about the possibility of "being chosen," finding themselves "analyzing" the process rather than stepping back and opening their senses and other ways of knowing. As one reported, "having a being choose me sounded really lame." He resisted it, but "for the sake of the class," he walked around his back yard and began to notice that he "always wound up in the same spot." Here is his description of his experience: "So I sat on the small rock coming out of the ground, that's obviously covering up the rest of its gigantic size in the dirt. Resting my eyes a little bit, I put my head between my knees and when I thought I was ready again, I glanced up and there it was. My eyes were capturing every fleck of color in the

plant. I was kind of stunned for a second and sort of thought to myself, is this it? Still, not fully understanding how it works, I've sort of come to the conclusion that it doesn't come from understanding or thinking about it. It comes from feeling, I think, a lot of my emotion and how my body feels, and reacts is what chooses me. That is what would be the most difficult - to let my body take control without my mind."

The next challenge is to relate directly to the natural being, to move beyond the habit of anthropomorphizing, of attributing human thoughts and emotions to the being. As for the process of developing a reciprocal relationship with the being, students at first find themselves looking for linear verbal communication. Instead, the process invites opening all ways of knowing and allowing the being to relate in its unique way.

In doing this, one student reported that she learned to rely on her senses in new ways, to open to unfamiliar feelings as her awareness heightened. In her words, "Presented with unseen complexity, a need for empathy, and the feeling of a greater energy at work, I felt a connection to the grass that encouraged me to give back."

Another reported that he has learned a new way of entering a landscape, "as a listener." "I have achieved a new sort of relationship category with this natural being," he says, "one that I can now identify in many other natural beings with which I relate." For still another student, visiting her being at night allowed her to experience reciprocal dialogue without human projection: "The transference of information felt pure, simple and enlightening. My whole body would respond as if my entire being were an ear - passive, restrained, wanting to hear all."

Many who spend regular time with a natural being experience an increased awareness of the world around them, enabling them to hear, see and feel things that are new to them. "The Being clued me in on the weather by moving its branches and making noises when I could not feel the wind on the ground." "Being with the water allowed me to hear about movement, change, and constancy."

Yet another student, chosen by an old oak tree, said, "I learned quite a bit from this practice, but the one lesson I hold closest is the lesson of receptivity. Opening myself to a communication with another being allowed me at times to be more receptive in other walks of life. Somehow this receptivity then sent out some sort of psychic broadcast signal to those who were receptive themselves ....I found myself have crazy conversations with strangers, learning lessons about myself and the world from leaves, feeling emotionally supported by means other than words...."

In being with the other, they begin to recognize that they are one of many, that they are part of a community. Many reported experiencing "an increased sense of being related," a larger sense of self. "Most of all," said one student, "it made me aware that we are part of a larger system." The actual experience of interconnectedness, of ecological consciousness, of interbeing, has also emerged for some during this experience. As another student, who's natural being was a hill, put it, "one thing to notice about interbeing dialogue is the recognition of the Other as the All. It is hard to communicate with the hill and not realize that the whole world is coming in: the rock under the hill, the contiguous forests further away, the hydrology moving with gravity eventually to the sea... The one human mind, mine, this isolated instance of consciousness, soon becomes like a drop of sea spray, a droplet suspended by a flash of lightening in time and space, soon to return to the breadth and depth of the entire ocean. This one little hill is but a representation of all that is beyond my own one mind. In the sense that a person has an obligation ..... to rejoin the Wholeness, the natural being exercise provides an unleaded bridge for this effort, to begin communicating and eventually identifying with the entirety of the surroundingness of beingness."

These are examples of the emergence of ecological identity, a consciousness of one's place in the ecological community. In Okanagan terms: one's "whole earth part." It goes beyond the limited sphere of human relations to encompass the relations, both immediate and indirect, between self and the more-than-human natural world. Through ecological identity, we widen the circles of our identification and extend the boundaries of our self-interest, enhancing our joy and meaning in life.

The healing effects of this process arise from slowing down and stepping back from habitual ways of thinking and rushing through our lives, spending time opening to other ways of knowing and to other beings. Students and clients report noticing that their compulsive ways of consuming are not very nourishing, that they are in fact missing contact with community, including more-than-human natural beings. They discover that solitude in nature is a way to open themselves to other relational levels, to communicate with themselves and with the larger world in deeper ways. Some have reported that they can take their concerns or their questions with them when they visit their natural being, and experience a shift in their awareness that opens new possibilities for them. In sum, another quote from a student: "Overall, I found this rather unusual exercise to be very therapeutic and awakening. It truly has given me a much deeper understanding and appreciation of myself and nature."

For the class Lane and I developed for the Sustainable Design program at the Boston Architectural College - from which these examples come - we also have the students engage in a Council of All Beings exercise during one of the three-hour classes. This involves Opening to Other in a small semi-natural setting in the middle of the city and "consulting this site" by being chosen by a natural being and opening to what the being has to say to architects who might build on this site. They then return to the room and draw a representation of being and speak as it in council. Some of the students who are working as architects in major firms have been very taken with this experience and have imagined it becoming part of the design team process.

Now I would like to invite you all to engage in a similar process.

- Put down whatever you are holding
- Organize into groups of three
- Now, get comfortable
- Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so
- Slow down and take a deep breath, leaning back from your usual way of being
- Allow yourself to experience contact with the ground by feeling your body on the chair, the chair on the floor of the building, the building on the earth
- Feel the ground coming up to meet you
- Now allow your imagination to take you out into the living web of life on this earth
- You may find yourself in some familiar natural setting
- Or simply open and present to sensations, images, intuition
- In this openness, let yourself be chosen by some natural being, some life-form
- Let yourself to be open and receptive to this other, to its display, its approach, its arrival
- Whether it be a plant, an animal, an ecological feature
- When the connection occurs, ask this being what it would like to communicate through you to the humans at this conference
- Take some time now to open to what this being has to offer
- Keeping your connection to your being, slowly return to this room
- Open your eyes

Now each of you will have a time to speak as your natural being to the others in your group of three. Speaking as your natural being, start by saying who you are and what messages you have for humans - what concerns, what requests, what gifts. As an example, "As Mountain,

I am ancient, strong, enduring. But now my forest skin is being torn off me, and my topsoil washes away, my streams and rivers choke. Dynamite shakes me and mines carve into my depths. I can offer you my deep peace, my steadfastness, my strength and endurance. Come to me to find your path to healing us all.”

- Each of you will have two minutes. I will ring this bell when it is time for the shift.
- The listeners' task is to be present, silently listening. When the speaker is finished, you say, "We hear you, Mountain."
- The next being then begins to speak.
- Now it is time to resume our human forms, to come back to this moment at the conference.

Ecological consciousness is certainly present in this room now! It emerges when we open to many ways of knowing, when we explore our embeddedness in community, when we experience this breakthrough moment on earth. As we recognize the sensitivity of our ecological systems and confront the possibility of breakdown, we each have a role to play. And that role is manifested when we are able to open to the flow-through of energy and information from the larger systems and participate in the shift in consciousness that is emerging.

I'd like to end with another poem - Rumi, Birdsong

- § -

Birdsong brings relief  
to my longing.

I am just as ecstatic as they are,  
but with nothing to say!

Please, universal soul, practice  
some song, or something, through me!

- § -

The way of love is not

a subtle argument.

The door there  
is devastation.

Birds make great sky-circles  
of their freedom.  
How do they learn it?

They fall, and falling,  
they're given wings.

- § -

Let your throat-song  
be clear and strong enough  
to make an emperor fall full-length,  
suppliant, at the door.

- § -

Rumi

(Translated by Coleman Barks,  
The Essential Rumi, 1997)