

For Love of the Soul of the World

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Responding to this invitation to write about “New (or Renewed) Visions for Ecopsychology” has been challenging. The difficulty stems from the fact that, for me, it is impossible to separate ecopsychology from depth psychology, and I cannot distinguish where one begins and the other ends. Both involve the study of psyche as a necessary component of our connection with nature. Both recognize the “ecological unconscious” as the most ancient and instinctive aspect of our collective human heritage (Roszak, 1992). Both dispute the Cartesian myth of separation and take on the task of re-visioning the world no longer as a conglomerate of dead material objects but as ensouled, alive and animate. Perhaps we might make a distinction saying that depth psychology focuses on psyche as an inner phenomenon, while ecopsychology turns its focus to psyche as an outer phenomenon; but as Carl Jung repeatedly claims, the two—inner and outer—are ultimately the same: “Our psyche is part of nature, and its enigma is as limitless. Thus we cannot define either the psyche or nature” (1964, p. 6). All to say psyche is illusive, impossible to define; thus, if ecopsychology is also a depth psychology, it beckons us beyond the boundaries of our rational mindset, beyond our tendency to want to grasp and understand, and invites us into a dynamic relationship with psyche and nature that is always in flux, always changing, just like the seasons and the tides.

Don’t get me wrong: I do think it is important to articulate and critically reflect upon our views and visions of ecopsychology. But when the invitation came out with questions such as do I think the field “is fine the way it is? If not, why not?” or “Where should the field go?” I drew a blank. The questions themselves belie ecopsychology’s essential ambiguity. Are there other ways of asking these questions that might elicit a more subjective, feeling-toned response, ways that invite responses beyond typical rational discourse? Are there ways to summon responses that reflect the essence of the field itself: interdisciplinary, rooted in nature, story, or even poetry? How can we

possibly describe the connection we have with the natural world, for instance, without the poetic language of metaphor? Even John Muir and Rachael Carson, who both considered themselves serious scientists, fell into the grips of romantic verse to express their connection to the land. Or perhaps the invitation would resonate better if I were asked how ecopsychology has personally affected my life, how it has entered my dreams and changed the way I relate to others, and mostly, how it has fostered my love for the world. What sort of vision would emerge from these questions?

Nevertheless, I do have an opinion, and it’s an evolving one that is continually informed by my practice. So it might be worth noting that, as I write these words, I am sitting in the bed of my pickup truck, which is now parked under a juniper tree in the backcountry of the Inyo Mountains of California. I am about a 90-minute drive from the nearest town and at least 40 minutes from pavement. The 4×4 road to get here winds through a narrow wash and up a rocky slope and is subject to washout during the late summer monsoon season. Utah juniper, pinyon pine, Mormon tea, and a surprising display of delicate high desert flowers, which miraculously appeared after a recent rain, sprout along the roadside and within the steep canyons. Looking west, I can see the ridgeline of the Eastern Sierra, its fine edge sharp against the soft blue sky. This is one of my favorite places in the entire world. And, as always, what brings me here is my work with the School of Lost Borders, a small nonprofit organization that specializes in wilderness rites of passage. It is through my work and dedication to this particular form and practice of ecopsychology that I am continually crafting my ideas about the field. Certainly, all my research and writing has helped me develop my ideas, but it has been through the praxis, and from nature herself, that these ideas have been informed.

Currently, there are 12 individuals scattered throughout the rocky terrain where they will spend four days and nights in solitude, without food or shelter. Although this is considered a solo time, it is really a community practice, being supported and held tightly within the spirit of ceremony. Ceremony is not all about pipes and drums, as some might imagine, but rather ceremony is simply what happens when groups of people gather with a similar intent, enabling each one to touch upon something greater than his or her individual self.

Ceremony occurs in good teaching, in psychotherapy, and most definitely in significant rites of passage. In this context, the intent is to listen, as carefully as possible, to the voices of nature and to tend to psyche fully with little or no expectation of outcomes. It's a mixed group: a social worker, a corporate CEO, a hairdresser, an unemployed student, a young mother of a six-year-old, a transgender woman, a 65-year-old grandmother, just to name a few. Some of them are what many of us would consider "ordinary" with little or no previous exposure to this type of experience. Some have come to mark pivotal transitions in their lives, and many come with stories of deep childhood wounds, serious trauma, and societal rejection. Even so, after having done this guiding work now for nearly 15 years, I have never, not once, come across anyone who asked to be "treated" in the modern psychological sense of the word. In fact, any attempts from the guides to technically influence or help someone change for the "better" have been sorely rejected. And yet, the profound transformation and healing that takes place among the participants is no less than miraculous.

Jungian scholar Marie-Louise von Franz writes, "Whenever we think we must alter outer nature or manipulate human beings or change them technically, we work for the destruction of our soul and our own life" (1992, p. 159). Here von Franz is referring to the harmful influences of 17th century rationalism, which for the last 400 years has trapped us in linear, cause-and-effect thinking. Thus, it makes sense that I cannot adequately measure what has brought about such profound shifts in consciousness among these participants. To do so is antithetical to the practice itself. Certainly, we could easily come up with some empirical studies about why and how this transformation takes place, but to do so means taking the risk of destroying its very life-force, its soul. No matter what data we generate, we must always accept that this data is conditional and can never fully grasp the mystery of such an encounter.

From this perspective, I often wonder if modern psychology has done more harm than good. As James Hillman suggests, modern psychology is a moralistic psychology in that it has set in motion a collective image of health and well-being that no longer reflects the profane and wild diversity of nature. He writes, "Moralism plagues psychology...psychology wants to show in the same demonstration both how we are and how we should be" (1975, p. 178). In adopting the Christian mythos of superiority (albeit unconsciously) we have measured ourselves against standards of perfection that ultimately foster a greater sense of alienation from each other, from nature, and from ourselves. It is my great fear that if we force ecopsychology into the

mainstream, particularly mainstream psychology with its emphasis on standardization, and away from the darker edges of soul, that it will also be forced to alienate itself from nature. It will simply become another ego-psychology under the guise of ecopsychology, utilizing nature as a therapeutic tool. And it is no secret that such aspects of clinical culture as the American Psychological Association, the publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, or the push toward evidence-based practices are all driven by the economics of mental health, insidiously under the pretext of the "helping profession."

On the other hand, if ecopsychology sustains the idea of an ensouled world, then it will be, by default, countercultural. To be adopted by the mainstream, ecopsychology would then be expected to demonstrate some economic value and, in order to have economic value, it would need to demonstrate its effectiveness. But soul is not effective. Soul doesn't succumb to our expectations, nor does soul necessarily lead us to where we think we should be. But if we are willing to sacrifice of our ego-centric perspectives and move toward a more eco-soul-centered practice, we can discover a deeper state of intimacy with nature and the world. As Hillman beautifully states, "A world without soul offers no intimacy" (1981, p. 120). So my vision for ecopsychology is an ecopsychology that is dedicated to intimacy, to the love of the soul of the world.

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