Exploring Ecopsychology

Theodore Roszak

The environmental crisis has become the news of the day every day. There is, as the journalists put it, a 'hole' saved for it in every edition of the papers, every newscast. That is all to the good. But it is a story without a center, a formless flurry of incidents and events. There are endless accounts of disaster, menace, impending doom; but the scattered reports come at us like gunshots fired by a sniper in the night. Our life is at stake, but the danger seems accidental, a stroke of bad luck. There are facts and figures about the threat, more than most of us can take in.

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At a certain point we may even grow numb and turn off in confusion or resignation.

Our argument here has been that the environmental predicament is a great deal more than this — more personal, more threatening, more radical. It may well be that more and more of what people bring before doctors and therapists for treatment — agonies of body and spirit — are symptoms of the biospheric emergency registering at the most intimate level of life. The Earth hurts, and we hurt with it. If we could still accept the imagery of a Mother Earth, we might say that the planet's umbilical cord links to us at the root of the unconscious mind.

Our culture gives us little opportunity to stop and to honor that great truth. There are no deep seasonal celebrations left that have not become media fictions and merchandising gambits. We give more attention to the Dow of the marketplace than to the Tao of the universe. But sometimes the voice of the Earth breaks through to us in an instant of realization that flashes back across the eons, reminding us of who we are, where we came from, what we are made of. For an instant we touch the great cosmic continuity that is easily lost in the frenzied affairs of the day. Here is a candid and moving example of such a moment, a recollection by Charlene Spretnak, one of the leading voices of the ecofeminist movement: 'In thinking about ecofeminism recently, I remembered an event that took place sixteen years ago, which I had nearly lost from memory. When my daughter was about three days old and we were still in the hospital. I wrapped her up one evening and slipped outside to a little garden in the warmth of late June. I introduced her to the pine trees and the plants and the flowers, and they to her, and finally to the pearly moon wrapped in a soft haze and to the stars. I, knowing nothing then of nature-based religious ritual or ecofeminist theory, had felt an impulse for my wondrous little child to meet the rest of cosmic society. The interesting thing is that experience, although lovely and rich, was so disconnected from life in a modern, technocratic society that I soon forgot all about it.'

A small private ceremony to welcome the newborn. But how furtively undertaken and how soon forgotten. And yet, unless the Earth can speak to us of our dependence in ways like this that engage the heart, what will all the knowledge of all the experts count for? It will remain a chaos of information without an integrating theme. That theme, if we have the courage to face it, is our entire way of life, the pattern and the power of an industrial culture that cuts us off from the natural continuum.

A feminist psychotherapist has suggested that the clinical setting for analysis might be changed in ways that seek to dissolve the masculine/feminine dichotomy with which so many patients are burdened. A more 'feminized' encounter might set a different tone for the examination of the self. Instead of the conventionally silent, detached and 'blank wall' stance of the (usually) male analyst, there might be an effort to achieve 'real relationship' and 'cognitive exchange' between the two participants. The objective would be to introduce more of the 'empathy and nurturance' that is stereotypically attributed to women.. No

doubt such a change would contribute to a warmer dialogue. Many practitioners over the years have felt the need for a different doctor-patient, therapist-client relationship, something more empathic and unstructured. But this more humane setting would still be surrounded by the same alienated urban-industrial context in which all therapy takes place in our society. It would happen in an office or a clinic. On the other side of the door would be the waiting room and the receptionist. Outside would be the parking lot, the street, the city, the suburb. The patient would leave to see more telephone poles than trees, more high-rise buildings than mountains, more storm drains than rivers. And overhead perhaps no sun or stars to be seen for the grime in the air.

What would it mean to 'prescribe nature' as part of therapy? Therapists, tied to the city by their careers and their bank accounts, cannot be expected to treat their clients anywhere but in the city. We have no psychiatry that requires doctor and patient to abscond to a place apart from human works and urban rhythms, not even for as long as a single therapeutic session. Therapy makes no demand for clean air, the songs of birds, the presence of trees or sea, mountain or stream. The troubled soul locked in a tortured ego will never be coaxed to look out and around at something greater, more lordly, more ennobling: a state of nature that invites the mind to contemplate eternal things. Yet common experience tells us that a solitary walk by the river or ocean, a few calm hours in the woods, restore the spirit and may produce more insight into our motives and goals than the best labors of the professional analyst. The quiet contemplation of the night sky before one turns to sleep and dreams might do more to touch the mind with a healing grandeur than weeks, months, years of obsessive autobiographical excavation.

My guess would be that by the time most clients have fought their way home on the freeway, whatever good was achieved during their $100-per-fifty-minute-psychiatric-hour has been undone. They are sunk once more in the collusive madness that they never left behind.

The issue I raise here about the practice of psychotherapy might, of course, be asked of everything that gets done within the confines of the urban empire, including my own work in the university and in the literary marketplace. What are my needs as professor and writer? Libraries, bookstores, university campuses, museums, art galleries, the media, and at last the money and means of the publishing industry. Even the most conscience-driven ecologists are beholden to the culture of cities to make their message known. The environmental philosopher Anthony Weston puts the point with admirable candor: 'I think it not surprising . . . that much of the environmental ethics offered by contemporary philosophers is very often the most abstract, wholly intellectual construction . . . How many times I have walked to my evening classes watching the blazing Long Island sunset, only to lose sight and thought of it as I am pulled into our windowless lecture building — even as I plan to discuss the values of nature! But what the literature offers fits the building, not the sky the building hides.'