



Ecopsychology

The Ecopsychology Group

In the latter years of this century, a new vision is emerging. It is also an ancient vision, one which invites us into a deeper connection with life. In this sense ecology is not just something outside ourselves — it is something of which we are a part and in which we have a role to play. Do therapists continue to ignore an 'ecological psyche', a human psyche as an integral part of the web of nature?

Various people have written theoretically and developed methods to explore the interconnections of the healing of the mind and the restoring of nature. We consider in the following articles some of the themes that have arisen amongst a group of therapists who are developing perspectives on ecopsychology.

Our vision is informed by these central principles.

- We view a person as a whole, as a part of larger 'whole' of family and community, and of the political sphere. We are also a part of the larger ecosystem of life on earth.

- The environmental crisis impacts on our psyche. Just as the earth as a living system profoundly affects health, so the state of the human psyche has profound implications for the health of the earth.
- We affirm the belief that our contact with nature, when in a healthy mutual relationship, is a healing and creative force in our lives.

Individuals, who are a part of the larger whole of the Ecopsychology Group of PCSR (Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility), have written the articles in this journal. The current group formed in 1996. We offer a forum in London for regular discussion and support. Current activities include the initiation of an ecopsychology network to stimulate contact among people in the field, and contributions to workshops and conferences — most recently planning and presentation for the international conference on Ecopsychology at the Findhorn Foundation.

Ecopsychology Group Members are: Tania Dolley, Ruth Finar, Patrick Henry, Moina Lake, Hilary Prentice, Ruth Roth, Mary Jayne Rust. Contact: Hilary Prentice 0181 520 1601. For network contact: Tania Dolley, 20 The Chase, Reigate, Surrey, RH2 7DH

The Psychological State of the Species

Hilary Prentice

Psychotherapy is about the healing of the human psyche. Each human psyche is forged within multiple webs of relationships — social, cultural, economic, familial, of lovers and of friends — and ecological. These social worlds, from the most intensely personal to the most broadly international, are in turn created by and reflect, the inner worlds and state of consciousness of the humans concerned.

So, I ask myself, and you, how is the human psyche, not just individually, but globally?

What happens if we take a common or garden psychotherapeutic stance and attempt to address the psychological state of the human as a species? Holding in mind, perhaps, the gentle question with which Yalom apparently initiated his first meetings with his clients 'What ails?', firstly we would probably check out some of the broad dimensions of any problems we may find, by looking at 'issues of risk'. Does our species pose a serious risk to other species, of violence, attack, or even murder? And the linked question — does our species appear to be actively suicidal, or to be behaving in seriously self-destructive or self-harming ways?

As with any assessment of risk to self or others, conflicting stories will be told as to

how great the risk is seen to be until, on occasion, it is too late. To me, however, it seems very clear that as a species we are involved in highly destructive relationships with other species. Quite specifically, as a direct consequence of our behaviour, ever more species are becoming extinct all the time (we are actively murderous). Further species are dramatically reduced in number, risking eventual extinction if they are not regarded as being of immediate profit to us as humans. The lives of remaining species, whether plant or animal, are usually entirely devoted to maximum exploitation by humans, and there seems in general to be no shame or remorse attached to this. The words 'use' and 'exploitation' are in common parlance, when discussing policy with regards to the 'natural resources' of land and sea.

Is the species equally suicidal or self-destructive, as well? Consciously, perhaps not, but the grossly self-destructive behaviour of intra-species violence and war, persecution, exploitation and domination are impossible to ignore at present. It is almost as though the psyche of the species is riven with deep schisms or splits, repression and conflict, and with this profound lack of internal integration the consciousness of overall connectedness and

Hilary Prentice is an integrative psychotherapist living and working in East London. For several years she has worked for a mental health charity and alcohol agency.

interdependence, and of the need for an inclusive, welcoming, shadow-embracing relationship to all parts of the self, is all but absent.

Overall, much of our species' current behaviour, much like someone suffering from a serious addiction, seems to be dedicated to immediate or very short term gain or pleasure, even though the long term consequences are likely to be disastrous. Specifically, like the addict, this gross 'using' behaviour simply cannot be sustained: it is outside of the cycles of growth, decay, and regeneration, or the safe husbandry of living within one's resources and taking care of those resources. Rather, ever greater levels of breakdown demand greater levels of 'using' in order to keep things going in the same direction, and furthermore to pretend that this is good.

Is this likely to result in death? Well, of course, this depends on whether the species is able to change direction sufficiently to mitigate its unsustainable behaviour, and eventually to forge a healthy and sustainable way of life. But certainly, as things stand, it is deeply implicated in destroying all that it depends on for its life; polluting and poisoning, desecrating and over-farming, the air, the forests, the land, the rivers and the oceans.

Put like that, our species sounds desperately self-destructive, as well as a bit of a psychopath. So, how much hope is there: how aware is it of how destructive its behaviour is? There's clearly an internal struggle here. The dominant consciousness appears to be in powerful denial, believing that all is fine and things can carry on the way they are without a problem. However, the species is showing

symptoms of disturbance at many levels, and some parts of the consciousness are registering distress and the desire to face what is going on. But most of the behaviour is still governed by the part of the psyche that is in denial, and can therefore, though very irrational, appear to justify that behaviour.

This focussing on short term pleasure or at any rate, relief, together with denial of the longer term destructive consequences to self and others, and hence an apparent lack of conscience about the destructiveness, does sound particularly typical of addiction. Are there substances or other entities that the species appears to be addicted to?

Arguably, yes. Consuming more of an infinite range of material goods has come to be equated, pretty much on a global basis, with the goal of life, and the source of happiness and satisfaction at every level. It is of course this very consumption that has such a destructive effect on the rest of the planet and hence indirectly the human species. But it is also very directly destructive: on the one hand the compulsion to consume leads to a psychology dominated by greed, and competition, arrogance and envy, deprivation and resentment and the deep sense of not being OK or complete as you are. On the other hand the process of addiction itself is ever more corrosive of the psyche and soul. The imagining that satisfaction lies in something that cannot really bring it, because it does not meet the deeper underlying needs — to be deeply heard, for healing, for love, intimacy, right relations, right livelihood, beauty, creativity, courage, and spiritual growth — leads to these 'real' needs being ever less likely to be met. Thus the sense of a deep inner void,

a gnawing emptiness, grows ever more pressing. Again, the urgency to fill it with what seems to be helping — because you do feel better for a while — ratchets up a notch.

Clearly, I could continue here awhile — to talk about omnipotent and grandiose fantasies and behaviour, about narcissism, hubris and loss of soul — and much much more. I imagine that each reader could, if they care to, flesh out other pieces of this picture through the imagery and concepts of their own favoured psychotherapeutic framework.

It's painful, though, isn't it?

In fact I believe that what I am trying to write about here is almost unbearably painful for each one of us. In my first attempt to lead an ecopsychology workshop — creating some space within a broader mental health conference for people to begin to share what 'comes up' for them around environmental issues in particular — one woman said that she felt if she really let herself face what is happening she would go mad. Another said that she can only bear to really let herself think about what is going on for a few minutes at a time. Conversely, at a gathering of environmental activists, where people were facilitated, to touch on their emotional responses to what they were already talking about, we found that the relief, lightness and increased sense of connectedness that followed from even limited 'sharing', was remarkable.

Fear for the future, tremendous grief at what we are daily losing of our planet, horror at the destruction, fury at whoever we perceive to be responsible, and often a terrifying sense of impotence, tend to be our emotional responses to what is occurring.

Surely psychotherapy — which is about the healing of the human psyche — is caught in its own 'crazy' mode of repression and denial if these issues and processes are not being addressed by it.

In fact a 'common or garden' psychotherapeutic stance has a great deal to offer in a situation of destructive and abusive dysfunctional behaviour, irrational thinking to justify it, and a great deal of repressed pain. We do know, I think, that it is broadly true that facing painful issues and feelings, and processing the painful emotions and thoughts as they arise, tends to be followed by increased insight, clearer thinking, and a freeing up and empowerment of behaviour. This is precisely the experience of those leading 'deep ecology' work, as developed by, amongst others, Joanna Macey in extending her work on Despair and Empowerment about nuclear issues.

And yet how many of us who work as, or are training in, psychotherapy, have ever used a single one of our own sessions to look at 'environmental' issues? Or been told that these are merely projections of our own 'personal' issues when we have tried to do so? Clearly, our 'individual' psychological issues will be deeply interwoven with our responses to the planetary situation; they are part of the same web of story, experience and meaning. But a tendency for psychotherapy to collapse our relatedness and responsiveness to the larger whole back into isolated individual dramas is, I would argue, a tendency to be made conscious, and to be resisted. Otherwise, our profession can only collude with the unaware repression and denial of our organismic knowledge of the danger we are in, and of the need to change course.

I find the potential for this movement of people drawn to the healing of human distress — the burgeoning world of psychotherapy and counselling — to

embrace and engage with the true crisis that we face as a species, to be enormously exciting. The transformation that is called for is profound: so, perhaps, is the healing.

The Interconnectedness of Everything

Ruth Finar

I'm not autonomous. I'm an organism which couldn't survive independently of my environment. I'm a product of that environment; I evolved out of the prevailing conditions.

Many of my organismic needs can be fulfilled only in conjunction with my environment. I need sustenance. I eat vegetables grown in the earth, themselves nourished by sun, rain and nutrients present in the earth from the living, dying and activities in between of other organisms over millions of years. I drink water whose ultimate source is precipitation brought about by particular atmospheric conditions. I need oxygen. I breathe in air which I process to exhale carbon dioxide. Convenient, isn't it, that plants need carbon dioxide and produce oxygen.

When I inhale, I take in particles of the skin that you have shed, particles of the dust disgorged by a volcano's eruptions thousands of miles away.

I need sunshine to maintain one of

many chemical balances. When the wind is high I am energised. One of my many cycles was named after the moon's cycle. If the moon draws the waters of the earth, surely it draws mine too; when the moon is full I dream vividly. The movements of all the planets exert their forces upon me. When I look at the night sky, I see the light of stars millions of light-years away, stars that no longer exist, and I am moved.

As an infant, I learned about myself from my mother and our interactions. I continue to experience myself in relation. When I am with another, we co-create our experience. When I'm working with a client I acknowledge that her way of being with me at a given moment has emerged from our inter-subjective life experience. Everything is relevant, her family history, the culture she grew up in, her values, what she had for breakfast, whether the train was late, whether the sun is shining, her somatic experience, her spiritual life. And mine. I attempt to provide a space where connection is possible, where our

Ruth Finar works as a gestalt psychotherapist in private practice and as a planning officer in a London social services department.