

urban industrial society, that is a root cause of so much malaise and distress? Have we somehow become disconnected from our source, or from our 'essential selves' in some fundamental but elusive way? I am left with a question about that, and the relationship between connection with the earth and connection with our deepest self.

I am not of course suggesting that if we all run around talking to sheep or trees that society's ills will magically vanish! But perhaps the 'environment', in its loosest sense, should be included and given a place at the table. This is perhaps particularly relevant in the field of psychology and psychotherapy which has tended to focus primarily on the individual psyche and personal difficulties, rather than on connections between the individual's experience and wider social, political or environmental concerns. There could be

parallels for example between the denial of destructive consequences shown by addicts, and the behaviour of our own society in relation to environmental problems; the issues are huge, difficult, painful to face and seem impossible to solve. Better to ignore it all and hope the problem will somehow sort itself out or just disappear.

This is why I am interested in ecopsychology. To me there is a clear and important connection between the professional fields of psychology/psychotherapy and environmental sciences/ecology, and also environmental activism. It is critical that the understanding and insight of each is able to contribute to the other, for the healing and wellbeing of both the individual and the planet. Ultimately, the earth can exist quite happily without us. We, on the other hand, cannot exist without the earth.

Thinking Class-Ecology

The Myth in the Domination of Nature

Patrick Henry

Our ways of thinking, in and out of therapy, are products which fit the requirements of our political society. It's easier to see with simple objects the way things are produced and fit requirements. Clothes, for example, have a particular style, are manufactured, transported and exchanged, and it's more obvious how

nature and humans are used in their production. Clothes fit habits and epochs, they have purpose and are part of a larger market of technological and economic stipulations and mores.

Seeing our own structures of thinking is harder. Like the production of clothes and other activities we participate in, words

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and organisation of thinking are in currency of the now. They have styles and are transported by the powerful mass media culture, which often creates meanings for the specific purpose of common behaviour. Occasionally less subtle manifestations come to our attention, such as the isolated tribes who, after TV was introduced, named their children after Disney characters. This culture is to keep us as participants within a limited system. In this system we are to adopt a cultural norm which, in general, accepts the exchange of objects for the usage of our labour or being. Our sense of self is limited by this dominant culture, and ideas outside the functions of this society are difficult to apply. In therapy, almost to compensate, we often seek goals of liberation, clarity and integration. How can these be justly carried out if the structure within which we make meaning, rather than humanising, acts as a clever apologist, mainly for marketing and its concomitant depersonalisation?

For instance, doesn't it give you an eerie feeling that our sense of 'progress' is built upon the destruction of nature and the oppression and alienation of the majority of workers in society? Are you satisfied with clichés of 'That's how it is everywhere', or 'What could I do to change things?', or 'Product X is great because . . .' Do these slogans, entrenched in common myths, along with your consumption of trinkets and commodities, satisfy or placate your concerns about destroying nature and enslaving (to various degrees) the majority of humanity? How can you rationally accept a world where continued technological advances mainly seem to make the few wealthier, compared with the social and personal suffering and cru-

elty that are increasing both domestically and internationally? Is it 'civilised' that we adhere to this dehumanising, powerful, dominant ideology which we internalise, uncritically making it our own (hegemony is about assuming the rulers' values)? Is it simply that you're too busy?

Therapy is increasingly seen as a solution for our alienation, confusion and loneliness. In therapy we focus on the roots of the problem in the individual, and usually disconnect from world issues. The individual is to become 'free' to be absorbed in the recreated (isolated) self, free to consume, sell her/himself or others as wage slaves, free to allow nature to be destroyed: all which is seen as 'normal daily life'. The therapist, well-trained, colludes with this delusional thinking, this denial and displacement, where life is removed from reality.

These dominant cultural beliefs overlay earlier fears of separation, loss, and death, and fears of being overwhelmed by the unknown and threatening world. Ancient myths fit the technology of their times as ours apply to the present. But our collective destructive capacity has increased, as has our personal distance from nature: estranged from direct relations with nature, we destroy it after denying its part in our living world. As nature has been fragmented and transformed into commodities, twisted into objects for sale and profit, we are told of our superiority. Nature is to be feared and dominated by us, the superior species. The ruling class continues to promote these fears, to control living beings, extinguishing their life-force, making them dead physically, socially and spiritually. Working people producing dead objects, like nature, are

boxed off and sold. Those directly and indirectly absorbed in this myth of domination become more alienated and estranged from life, more hopeless, and lose contact with dynamic life.

Western distancing from the whole and from nature accelerated around the seventeenth century, when mechanisation increased. Mechanisation required concepts of dualism (e.g. body vs mind, flesh vs spirit, nature vs culture) as beliefs that supported those modes of production. Scientific, religious and socio-psychological systems of thinking justified this society of mass production. Its dominant culture would have us deny the 'unbearable' thoughts of our mortality and how we are inextricable links with all nature. It hopes such things as science and medicine will save us from death, and space travel will help us to escape the planet we have disfigured and destroyed. Life, in this mechanical world, is seen as something that can be produced and traded. In adhering to these mechanistic beliefs, to sedate our fears, anger and ignorance, we are controlled and dominated by them. Accepting them, we act as their agents.

Yet our myths are not universal. There are many examples in traditional societies where an individual's problem is seen as rooted in society. Amongst the Ndembu of Zambia, an individual's treatment involves change in the whole village. Through prolonged collective therapy, thinking and acting are altered within the village.

What this piece is about is to encourage the creation of a more comprehensive therapy, one which takes account of how an individual sustains a nurturing process with other living realities based in nature, as well as of the needs of the psyche. In doing so, we should avoid reductionistic beliefs, such as that our worries about nature are simply a type of separation anxiety. Our task is to understand how and why we accept beliefs and actions which result in the domination of nature and living organisms. It is that we should not deny, displace and disengage, create illusions that the destruction of life is OK because it appears to us (through the control of our thinking and activities) that we are not involved. It is about a therapy which is liberationist as well as liberating.

Further reading on ecopsychology

Howard Clinebell, *Ecotherapy: Healing ourselves, healing the earth*, Fortress Press, 1996

Chris Johnstone, *The Lens of Deep Ecology: Pain for the world, systems theory, and finding our power to make a difference*, Institute of Deep Ecology UK, 1994

Joanna Macey, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to re-connect our lives, our world*, New Society Publishers, 1998

Theodore Roszak, Mary Gomes and Alan Kanner, *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth: Healing the Mind*, Sierra Club Books, 1999

Nancy Ryley, *The Forsaken Garden: Four conversations on the deep meaning of environmental illness*, Quest Books, 1998