

# Ecotherapy: Exploring Ancient Techniques for a New Branch of Therapy

Annie Spencer

## SYNOPSIS

Annie Spencer, one of the creators of the Human Nature School offering trainings in ecopsychology and nature-based practice, sets out some of the radical challenges that ecopsychology brings to our therapeutic practice. For solutions she introduces us to indigenous practices which may hold ways of healing still relevant to us today.

A man sits carefully making an exquisite pattern with different coloured sands. As he pours them on to the ground, a picture starts to emerge: mountains rise up, sacred plants seem to blow in the winds, strange beings come to inhabit this landscape. Finally, when he is done, he beckons to someone who has been waiting and guides them to introduce themselves into this richly symbolic landscape, this peopled place, this forgotten home. Here she will sit while he sings ancient songs to her. Songs that remind her of how she belongs here in this sacred landscape, of how beautiful it all is when all, including herself, live in balance with one another once again.

Traditional societies know that we have to return to the land for healing. The Navaho do their sand paintings and sings. Those needing guidance go out on to the land to quest for vision. Herbs are gathered; omens sought; sweat lodges built. The Australian First Nations make scrapes in the land so that people may give away to the earth and receive renewed strength in return. Indigenous peoples around the world are having to deal with problems of severe alienation, alcoholism and abuse. They have turned to their traditional ways of

healing, and found them to be powerful remedies for the disease of these times. Theirs is an ecopsychology whose roots stretch back for millennia.

Over the past 2,000 years we in our Western culture have developed ways to cocoon ourselves from nature, and we have done this so well that for the majority of us, seeing ourselves as part of the natural world is no longer a meaningful concept. As we know, this is having dire results in many areas of our lives, and so we are searching for ways to embed ourselves in the natural world once more. We are starting to remember who we are and how we need to feel at home on this earth to feel sane and whole. As this movement develops, so it has birthed a new branch in psychology: ecopsychology.

Ecopsychology is the branch of therapy that is exploring ways for us in the 21st century to achieve, within our paradigms, what the ancients knew long ago. Yet although ecopsychology has been around in our reading and our thoughts for over twenty years – Theodore Roszak's seminal book *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* was first published in 1992 – it seems that it is slow to develop its own discipline in this country.

Could this be because we are not sure how to go about it? It is such a great step from psychotherapy as we know it. Working with people on the land? Healing people not through them picking apart their stories and rebuilding them and their sense of self. Not an expansion of that by learning how their family patterns affect their behaviour; not learning to release the deep holding of emotional patterns that we carry in our bodies. Not using our imaginations to find acceptable ways of bringing from the unconscious parts of ourselves that we would rather remained hidden. None of this. Something else entirely. The suggestion that we might learn to remember that we are part of a huge non-human body, a living breathing organism called the earth. Made of her flesh and bones, breathing her breath – I liked David Abram's desire to call

her *earth* rather than earth, and thus acknowledge that the atmosphere is also part of the earth so in fact we are not so much walking on her as swimming within her:

The air is not a random bunch of gases simply drawn to earth by the earth's gravity, but an elixir generated by the soils, the oceans, and the numberless organisms that inhabit this world... all of us contributing to the composition of this phantasmagoric brew, circulating it steadily between us and nourishing ourselves on its magic, generating ourselves from its substance. It is as endemic to the earth as the sandstone beneath my boots.

Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology by David Abram

And yet. How many of us could say that we have a strong felt sense of being at home on the land? How many of us feel capable of leading clients on a journey home? We may understand about the ecosystems of our world. We may be concerned about the crisis our culture is in at the moment, with our inability to forgo the addiction of shopping and ever-increasing consumerism. We may realise that for most of us this endless buying of things is just filling a gaping hole within ourselves. Yet most of us continue to sit in a room, working with our clients in isolation; trying to mend what maybe can't be mended unless they and we find a way home to our true home. Find a way back to a solid sense of belonging in this biosphere.

Yet, even here I feel that I am preaching to the converted. So what holds us back? What seem to be missing are structures and a translation of socio-political ideas into therapeutic tools underpinning psychological practice. How far could we use this ecopsychology as an extension of what we already do? How far would it be a radical departure?

Looking at the culture as a whole, I see how far psychological language and ideas permeate it, at least in a superficial way. When I was trying to find a therapist back in the late 1970s, for most of us there was nothing between a long analysis or pills from the doctor. Added to that, there was a huge silence surrounding psychological problems. You should either pull yourself together or be shut away in a mental hospital. Today, young women and men talk about their feelings, and as a matter of course understand them in quite a sophisticated way. This has of course brought its own problems: many forgive themselves their weaknesses of character, their inability to build a relationship or persevere towards their goals by describing these traits as ones brought on by their childhood and bad parenting, bad teaching, cruel siblings or classmates, hereditary weaknesses. For example: I drink too much because my grandfather was an alcoholic; I am sex addicted like all the men in my family, etc. etc. And the story is endlessly repeated but never moved beyond. Where before we were in denial, now we

collectively wallow in our own pathology.

A radical change would be for us, the therapists, to move from trying to get a deep and detailed understanding of our clients' pathology to a mode where our aim is to help them begin to feel at home, safe, protected, nurtured, belonging, held now, in the present, as they are – confused and messed up. To accept that we will all always be a contradictory bundle of urges that will never smooth out into a harmonious pattern. But that we could feel safe enough and belonging enough to be prepared to learn ways to control our worst impulses without perhaps understanding their roots too much.

Where would we look for help in trying to find the techniques and modes for that?

Traditional peoples have a lot to offer. The Navaho have a sophisticated and complicated system for dealing with all sorts of psychological unease and trauma. They do not take you out on the land. Instead, they work with sand to build a highly symbolic rendering of the land of their peoples, they build the sacred mountains and they create the spirit likenesses of holy plants, such as the corn, which bring them sustenance. They include the great beings of the weather, such as the thunderbirds, and they bring in the spirit beings who keep all of creation in balance. Last, they set the client to sit within this cosmology and then chant a *sing* to put them back into balance with the land, and with the mythology of their peoples. A *sing* is a highly poetic, repetitive and hypnotic reminder of who the people are; what are their landscape and mythology; and how they belong inside all of this, in beauty, in balance, at home. They believe that this will bring them back into balance within themselves. The sand painting may take hours to prepare, the *sing* may take up to two weeks to perform. For this to be successful, the client comes accompanied by many members of her or his family and community.

The First Nations of Australia work directly with the earth and the elements. Often the client is asked to lie on fresh earth and may be covered by ashes. Fire can also be used to empower the healer.

For other North American First Nations people, the sweat lodge is used for many reasons. Or, if a client is confused about their direction, they may be supported to go out to sit on the land for days and nights while fasting, waiting for vision or healing to come to them.

A sweat lodge is not just a sauna. As you prepare and build the lodge, cutting saplings, bending and tying them, going far afield to collect stones that are volcanic and therefore able to tolerate the heat of a fire without exploding; digging holes, creating the form, covering it with layers of blankets; so at each step you are reminded that you are making a womb place, a returning place to your beginnings. When all is ready and you

finally enter the lodge, it is naked and on your hands and knees – you are crawling back into the womb of the earth. There, as the hot steam rises, you not only sweat impurities out of your body, you also cry and pray and let go of old hurts, angers, resentments, frustrations. You remember abuse and violence done to you and your people, and you give the memories back to the earth, the mother from whom we are all made. Each and every atom in our bodies comes from her in some way or another. Then, when finally you crawl out into the fresh air once more, you are reborn, renewed, with an opportunity to live your life in a refreshed, more forgiving, creative and hopeful way. Here is ecopsychology at its most primal.

So it is not just a question of taking people out on to the land or into the company of animals. We need to explore what works, and how we can refine our ways of introducing people to the land.

And will this affect our mode of working? We have got very accustomed to the hour or 50-minute session, but perhaps this mode will require a different rhythm altogether. It might be important to extend the session to two hours. We might have to take the client away for a chunk of time. We might have to work with the client to get to a place where they would be willing to undertake such a journey and then the client might have to find the place and discover the features of a landscape that they might call home. Members of their family might have to be brought in for part of the work.

Would we work partly in our traditional way and spend part of the time on the land, or would we trust that going on to the land would be as powerful as all our tool bag of techniques? This would fit in with our ideas of the interconnectedness of all things. Traditional peoples have long believed in the importance of omens. A great bird swooping across your path, a violent storm, a branch suddenly crashing to block your path. All these are not coincidences but signs that need to be read and taken seriously. For we are all connected, and if we look carefully we will see that indeed, the natural world does mirror us back to ourselves with uncanny certitude. And of course the signs are generally not so grand. Again, we need to train ourselves to pick up the subtle pointers that will open up the needs of a client to themselves and to us.

I see this again and again when I send people out on vision quest. For four days they sit in one place with nothing to do – no calls to make, no TV, no books or news, no friends or tasks, not even any meals to make or drinks to heat as they fast for the duration of their time out. On their return they often say that nothing of any importance happened. Then you have to coax the small stories of their days out of them and sure enough, patterns will emerge and the natural world will be found to be telling them things, and often saying the same thing in different ways over the days.

Another practice that we well might take on board is that of finding your *place*. If we lived on our ancestral lands, that wouldn't be a problem. We would be home. All peoples know the importance of knowing home. Some peoples mark their territory by a mountain or an old tree or a lake, and name them as the origination place. Others will carry a pole with them as they wander. Whenever they set up their homes, the pole will be erected in a prominent place to be their axis mundi once more. One way that we can claim a home is to find a spot that feels good and important in some way. Then with ceremony the person buries various objects there. This place is now designated home. It can be visited, but also it can be held in the heart and seen in the mind and called on in the imagination – a powerful way of claiming a small part of the earth for oneself.

Of course there is much that we can adapt from our known ways of working when we venture out into this new territory. Sensory awareness exercises help clients to open up to the natural world. Living as we do in urban areas, we close down our sense of smell against the carbon dioxide; close down our hearing against the harsh noises of traffic and other machinery; don't notice the detail of the rubbish and harsh and arid cliffs of brick and concrete that surround us. It takes time and work to be aware of all the smells and perfumes that there are out in a wood or a meadow, to hear the subtle differences between bird calls and to learn what messages are flying around among the trees; to notice a small mark in mud and to recognise the hoof of a deer or the claw of a badger.

This is an exciting and hopeful journey. As we search for ways to bring our clients home in a way that will be healing for them, so we bring ourselves closer to home, so we open up to the natural world and find joy in remembering who we truly are and in reclaiming the vast family of this planet as relations of our own. ♻



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## References

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