# Soul encounter at the Edge of World: Ecopsychology, Adolescents and Education

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## SYNOPSIS

**This article describes the practice of reconnecting adolescents with nature using wilderness experience, woodland management and vision quest. It explores the limitations of ecological and biological descriptions of the world and how we might find an ecopsychological language that can inform ecotherapy practice. Drawing on the work of Rudolf Steiner, Gregory Bateson and Henry Corbin it suggests how recognition of the imaginal world might be useful in creating a therapeutic education curriculum for adolescents.**


In my current work as a systemic family therapist I often sit with young people who have self harmed or overdosed and we try to explore how they arrived at this difficult place. They sometimes seem stuck within inflexible narratives that they seem to have no capacity to change, dominated by stories of past experiences and yet unable to imagine different futures. They are like characters stuck in some awful computer game where it is impossible to find any 'cheats'. Nature, however, is not like this, and is constantly changing. Each year I am fascinated to watch how delicate seedlings can germinate out of the hardest dry seeds. We can observe the logical stages of flowers developing seeds in the autumn, but following the germination and growth out of seeds in springtime requires a little more imagination. As James Hillman suggested in his acorn theory, although we live life forwards, if we want to make full sense of life it is sometimes helpful to 'read life backwards' (Hillman, 1997). Like the observation of germinating seedlings, it is this process of trying to see the emergent future, the 'image in the acorn', that can be helpful for anyone who works with adolescents.

## In Search of the Wild

I have been interested in the relationship between humans and nature for a long time, and I joined the Ecology Society at school to help promote the importance of recycling tin cans. Ecology at that time was a radical and somewhat mythic idea within biology, alluring and alternative, but for me somehow missing something of life's spark. Back then, the idea that the country would one day have a doorstep collection of recyclable waste would have been so fantastic as to be laughable. Times change. However, I moved on from biology and ecology with the idea that if we were to save the planet from destruction, education might be a good place to start.

An interest in what is know known as 'ecopsychology' led me, in my late twenties, to work as a Steiner school biology teacher. I inherited with the job a geography field trip to north Wales. It soon become clear to me that simply being in nature had a profound effect on adolescents. It seemed to improve their ability to concentrate and focus and also helped the social development of the group. Even in the days before mobile phones and the internet, the

adolescents I worked with were deeply embedded in a culture of continuous exposure to music and media, and very remote from wild nature.

This encouraged me to explore the use of extended wilderness camps by taking groups backpacking. There was something in the exposure to nature that was important although I could not identify what it was. I was at that time inspired by indigenous cultures and their trust in the healing relationship with nature that Chief Luther Standing Bear suggests:

> The old Lakota was wise. He knew that man's heart away from nature becomes hard; he knew lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans too. So he kept his youth close to its softening influence. (McLuhan, 1972)

I wondered whether it would still be possible to create an educational curriculum that empowered young people to experience a deep and transformative connection with the earth and themselves.

I prepared the class over the whole year for this threshold experience: starting with a day walk in the hills, followed by a weekend camp in the mountains and then the wilderness trip. Ten days and nights of wild camping and walking in wilderness Scotland with minimal contact with other people or human-made structures. We took all we needed in the way of food and drank from the steams, told stories in the evening and listened to the roaring of the rivers at night. We immersed ourselves in the other than human world, the remnants of ancient pine forest, deer, wild flowers and rocks. The focus was on being rather than doing. After three days the group would invariably relax and the pace of the usual restless teenage energy would slow down. After ten days the group became so relaxed and content that they often commented that they did not want to 'go back'. Greenway (1995), describing the 'wilderness effect', comments that it only takes three or four days for modern humans in wilderness experience to forget their daily work life and begin thinking and dreaming archetypal images, and he suggested that modern culture is only 'four days deep'.

Over 20 years later I sometimes get stopped in the street by ex-students who remember the trips, and recently I received a postcard from someone who was on the first camp trip, telling me how important this event was for them. Inspired by an account of a teacher taking adolescents into wilderness in Sweden I believed I had thought up the wilderness experience myself. I later discovered others who had spontaneously created almost identical experiences all over the world in different settings. Wilderness experience is now an established practice within ecotherapy.

## Into the Woods

Leaving the Steiner school, my interest in working outdoors led me to being involved in a therapeutic education programme for young people based on craft and land work. Here I was asked to set up a woodland management programme that was both educational and therapeutic. I wrote a woodland management plan combining therapeutic education, ecology and productivity in equal measure. It included thinning high canopy trees with hand tools, a 10-year coppice rotation, charcoal burning and tree planting.

In fact, the woodland became both the classroom and the curriculum, a classroom without walls that was containing and contextualising. Every day was different, and every part of the wood communicated its ancient and recent history in a language of tree species, stages of regeneration, old stumps and animal footprints. Every day the students stepped into a lived and reciprocal relationship with the 10,000-year-old ecosystem of ancient semi-natural woodland. Time slowed down to the pace of tree growth; two years for seasoning wood, ten years for the coppice cycles and natural regeneration that would take 120 years to mature.

The woods provided a safe container for students with high levels of anxiety, in a way that the walls of a classroom did not. Whilst working in the woods engaging in physical work, the young peoples' difficulties become apparent in a way that was neutral and non-judgmental. Nature became the teacher and therapist, and my role became that of a facilitator of a mutually self-healing process. Gregory Bateson believed that human beings and nature

were part of a self-healing system that slowly healed itself of disturbance and incoherence.

After seven years of working in the woods with adolescents every day, my interest in the healing capacity of nature deepened. I remembered an account of a Native American vision quest I had read in a book in my early twenties. It described a deeper spiritual, rather that just ecological, connection with nature. Totton (2011) quotes an example of a description by an Inuit shaman describing what he learnt on his initiatory vision quest:

> I heard the voice of nature itself speak to me, and it spoke with the voice of a gentle motherly solicitude and affection. Or it sounded something like children's voices, or something like falling snow, and what it said to me was 'do not be afraid of the universe'.
>
> (Osterman, 1927, cited in Totton, 2011)

This perhaps indicated an awareness of the therapeutic value of communication with nature amongst some indigenous cultures to which we not longer seem to have access.

## Threshold to the Land of Lost Borders

Having spent much of my life exploring nature and wilderness I did not expect to learn very much from camping out in the woods for four days in Wales on my first vision quest. How wrong I was. Vision quest is a mythic journey in real time, a descent to and return from the underworld.

After completing my first vision quest I met Stephen Foster and Meredith Little, founders of The School of Lost Borders while they were in the UK and decided to join the month-long vision quest guides training in California.

During this vision quest I spent four days fasting alone in the high desert of California. Exposed to the ancient ecological patterning of nature, my own constructed reality peeled away and I came back from the edge of the world with a deeper narrative and a delicate new sense of self.

Vision quest or fast is a wilderness experience that includes a four-day ritualised solo time without food, as well as the use of reflective and narrative practices. Many participants on the vision fast return from the solo time with a 'remembered' connection to nature, a renewed and enriched experience of the context of their lives and often a personal experience of the sacred. Bill Plotkin (2008) calls this peak experience 'soul encounter'. He describes how human beings have shared a non-verbal language with nature for millennia, in the form of 'image'. It is this experience of the 'imaginal world' that can show us patterns within our lives and help us to connect with the natural world.

On my return to the UK, my job changed, and I began to work with adolescents in transition from college. I also began to work part time with a small independent Sixth Form College combining the woodland management work with a youth vision quest. The students worked outside in the woods, one day a week for the whole year, felling and clearing in the winter, coppicing in early spring and learning to identify woodland flowers and plants in the summer. This programme provided nearly a year's lead-up time to the vision quest - time to build trust in the group and myself - and culminated with summer vision quests in different locations, including Spain, Scotland and Devon.

I wanted to create a programme of education that enabled the student to understand the earth in an experiential and embodied way, as well as to help the students open to the possibility of a deeper connection to their emergent futures.

I believe that one of the main barriers to our experience of nature is the fact that our contemporary relationship with nature is almost exclusively described in the 'uncompromisingly modernist language' of Darwinian evolutionary theory. It has given us a lot of answers, yet we continue to live what indigenous people call 'the big lie' that nature and human consciousness are separate. I had wrestled with the question of our relationship with nature for many years and knew there was something about exposure to nature that was important. There was something of the experience that did not fit with our scientific language but was often described in the language of the artists. I was determined to discover what it was, a truly ecological description of the world that included human experience which had somehow been left out of the discipline of ecology. It was perhaps this interest that ultimately led me to begin my training as a systemic family therapist.

## Languaging the Imaginal World

My training as a family therapist deepened my curiosity

about the healing capacity of vision quest and its relationship with psychotherapy and its links with the growing field of ecopsychology. I also became interested in parallels between the works of Rudolf Steiner and Gregory Bateson. Both men were inspired by the work of Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, and both insisted that we needed separate languages to describe the living and the non-living worlds.

Having worked practically with the indications of Rudolf Steiner within therapeutic education and social processes for 25 years, I have been struck by how relevant this work could be to an understanding of a different connection between the human mind or psyche and nature. I have also been frustrated by how Steiner's language is almost completely incomprehensible within contemporary culture and have explored how this could be improved. My frustration is confounded by the fact that Steiner brings a fanatically radical new story to this issue, one based on the work of Goethe. Goethe believed that it was not possible to study living organisms in nature in a reductionist or mechanistic way without losing an understanding of nature's wholeness. He believed that each organism was shaped by an intrinsic lawfulness that manifested in its unique form. Goethe's careful observation of plant and animal shapes and patterns led him to the discovery of a 'language' made up of images or patterns. He used this method in a study of animal bones, reading the bones as if they were a text or language. From this observation he developed his ideas on the relationship of human beings to the rest of nature.

Based on his study of Goethe's work, Steiner described how the thinking that is required to understand non-living systems, such as buildings, geology, mechanics and mathematics, does not work if we want to think about living systems, such animals, plants, human learning and behaviour. In order to understand living systems, he said we need to use a kind of imaginative thinking that he called, 'exact sensorial imagination' or 'sense-free thinking' (Steiner, 1928)

If we could achieve this type of thinking then we could begin to get an understanding of the landscape in which nature and psyche are grounded. In order achieve 'sense-free thinking', we need to open up a new and unfamiliar way of engaging with the world. This cannot be achieved just by deeper thinking about the world or by even more careful observation but by opening up a space between the two. Steiner described this way of experiencing the world as 'the thinking of the heart'. He also described how both nature and the human psyche are, he believed, organised from a non-physical and invisible realm, which he calls 'the spirit world'. Today this term comes with considerable cultural baggage, and it might be useful to find a better word.

Bateson (1979) also cited Goethe as an inspiration, and also insisted that we need a new way of thinking about the world in order to understand the current ecological crisis, and that scientific thinking was not sufficient to bring this about: 'The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think' (Bateson, 1979).

Bateson was a lifelong critic of Darwin and was convinced that Darwin's explanation of the origin of animal and plant evolution was not adequate and that 'The shapes of animals and plants are messages'. Bateson believed that these messages were written in a language, not of words or concepts, but of patterns or stories that both psyche and nature could understand. If this language could be deciphered, perhaps we might discover where nature and mind meet. It was, however, Bateson's daughter Catherine Mary Bateson (Bateson and Bateson, 2005) who articulated what her father was trying to say most clearly to bridge the divide between mind and nature. She described, like Steiner, that while it has been essential historically to develop a language for understanding non-living matter, we need a different language to describe living systems: 'If we want to talk about the living world and ourselves we need to master the disciplines of descriptions and references in this curious language that has no things in it but only differences and relationships' Bateson and Bateson, 2005).

For a third description of the connection between mind and nature we can turn to the work of the French philosopher and scholar of esoteric Islamic literature, Henry Corbin. Corbin was a contemporary of Carl Jung, and his work was one of the inspirations for Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, an ocean of archetypal patterns and images that influence dreams, cultures, myth and even nature. Corbin describes his discovery of a 'lost continent' of language in Islamic literature (Cheetham, 2003), the literary equivalent of Columbus's discovery of the new world. What he discovered was an Islamic description of a reality that lay between what we call in the Western world the subjective and the objective. This world is called in Arabic 'Alam al-Mithal'. Corbin translates this into Latin as the 'mundus imaginalis', *or in English the 'imaginal world'.*

Like Steiner, Corbin identifies the organ of perception of this mysterious world as the heart, that can open a new way of thinking that he calls 'active imagination' or 'a perfectly objective imaginative perception'.

This is a way of knowing called 'Gnosis'. It is a type of transformative learning, a gaining of knowledge that changes and transforms the knowing subject. Again, like Steiner, Corbin describes a method of experiencing the

imaginal world by learning to read the signals or messages, a practice of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics derives from Hermes the trickster and Greek winged messenger from the Gods. We can think of hermeneutics as learning to read the tracks or footprints of this winged messenger: a trail laid in a language that has no words but is made up of patterns and connections linking psychological and natural processes; the language of the imaginal world; the language of the heart. This is a place that might sound familiar to artists and musicians in search of inspiration, and is similar to the mysterious therapeutic space between a therapist and a patient or an indigenous hunter and landscape.

This 'imaginal' description of the world is captured in the poetry of the 13th century Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi:

Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and right doing
There is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas language, even the phrase each other
Doesn't make any sense

Rumi (in Barks, 2003)

## Following the Footprints of the Winged Messenger

At the time of Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, the Western world was ripe to receive a theory of evolution that could reflect and justify the ethics of the industrial revolution and the logic of the material world. Darwin's theory, developed from the ideas of Victorian economist Thomas Malthus, contradicted the belief held by the church that God was the prime organiser of all forms in nature. Darwin looked for external forces that could result in nature's multiplicity of form. Darwin found this in the idea of nature selection using his meticulous observation and careful thinking. He was not looking for inner patterns, language or signals. He was not looking for the footprints of Hermes. That was too close to the territory of the church. He was looking for a mechanism that could free biology from the grip of ecclesiastical thinking. But after years of study and deteriorating health, Darwin himself recognised he had lost touch with his own heart. In his later years he wrote,

> Poetry of many kinds gave me great pleasure, formerly pictures and music a very great delight. But for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry; I have also lost any taste for pictures or music, my mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding out general laws out of a large collection of facts.
>
> (in Cheetham,2003)

Goethe's approach to the study of nature grew out of his artistic practice, and was very different. He recognised that the interaction of organisms with their environment shaped their form, but beneath this he sought an underlying lawfulness or type that manifested in the uniqueness of each organism, a hidden language or 'signal' from a spiritual or imaginal world. His observations were clearly transformative in nature, and in contrast to Darwin led Goethe into a direct experience of Gnosis, heart knowing. He wrote to a friend:

> I *cannot tell you how readable the book of nature is become for me; my long efforts at deciphering, letter by letter, have helped me; now all of a sudden it is having its effect and my quiet joy is in expressible.*
>
> (Steiner, 2000)

It was Goethe's observation of the patterns and archetypes in plant and animal form that informed Steiner's ideas: nature was not just the result of random mutations but all nature was patterned with reoccurring archetypes in a language that we can learn to read.

## Re-storying the World

> The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.
>
> Muriel Rukeyser

Corbin insisted that 'the Soul is in exile in the modern world' (p. ) of material causality. This has never been more so than today, where the emerging psychological depth of adolescence is met by an increasingly virtual world of digitally constructed reality. What would it mean if we were able to create an 'en-souled' education system? Schools that would allow for the restoring of a world-view where our relationship with nature was not as concrete and separate from our minds as Descartes would have use believe? Perhaps we are really living in a much more dynamic world. A world described by one contemporary Islamic philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, as a reality where, 'at every moment the universe is absorbed in the divine centre and manifested anew in a rhythm of contraction and expansion which the rhythm of human breathing resembles' (Cheetham, 2003)

By creating experiences of soul encounter we are able to slip beyond the borders of what we know as objective reality, our rational socially constructed universe. In this way, the world is turned inside out, and it is possible to encounter the other-than-human world. As David Abram describes it: 'this breathing landscape is no longer just a passive backdrop against which human history unfolds, but a potentized field of intelligence in which our actions participate' (Abram, 1996).

Experience of Soul encounter represents a symbolic death to the world of impersonal objective knowledge, a tearing of the veil of the temple of the human sense-bound experience; an experience that Corbin describes as: 'What the soul suddenly visualises is its own archetypal image, that

image whose imprint it simultaneously bears within, projects, and recognises outside of itself?'(Cheetham, 2003).

From this place the Soul finds itself no longer a stranger in the world but at home in a world of animated presences, an imaginal world that contains within it a sub-set that we call the material world. In this new story the future is no longer causally determined by external forces but, according to Corbin, depends on how the soul understand itself and upon its refusal or acceptance of a new birth. I suggest that science and especially biology, may have forgotten the language of nature, and that we need to re-imagine the story of our world where the patterns and language of nature are also a guide to patternings of the developing psyche or soul. By learning the language of nature we also begin to learn the language of the soul, one of the oldest stories in the universe that predates the rise and fall of human cultures. If the next generation is growing up in exile from their own souls and the natural world, we are sleepwalking into a social disaster. In therapy the process of letting go of our old and well-loved stories can be a very difficult and sometimes a heart-breaking journey, but as Robert Romanyshyn (1999) suggests,'Maybe grief does have the power to break the mind and its will... so thoroughly that miracles break through'.

But there is hope. In the last few decades we have seen radical changes even in our thinking about recycling cans. What was once a crazy fantasy has now become a nationwide weekly reality. So we might one day create a contemporary indigenous education system based on practices informed by our understanding of the imaginal language of nature and the Soul. But to start this I think we will need to peek beyond the veil of Darwin's modernist story of our relationship with nature, and find a better one.

I will leave the final word to Jalaluddin Rumi, who captures an imaginal description of the world that contains metaphors and patterns that move between nature and the human mind. At the end the poem promises that within every moment there is the potential of a breakthrough from our dominant linear narrative. This is, perhaps, the essence of any therapeutic process, a lesson from nature and potentially a way of seeing beyond our current story of ecological despair.

**Hidden Inside**

Hiding is the hidden purpose of creation.
Bury your seed and wait.
After you die, all the thoughts you had will throng around like children.
The heart is the secret inside the secret.
Call the secret language and never be sure what you conceal.
It's unsure people who get the blessing.
Climbing jasmine, opening rose, nightingale song, these are inside the chill November wind. They are its secret.
How did you discover mine? Your laugh.
Only the Soul knows what love is.
This moment in time and space is an eggshell
with an embryo crumpled inside, soaked in spirit-yolk,
under the wing of grace, until it breaks free of mind
to become the song of birds, and their breathing.

Rumi (in Barks 2003)

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