Eros, Animal and Earth

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SYNOPSIS

'I love nature' is a well-used used phrase. We humans are fascinated with other species, in awe of the beauty of our land. Yet the history of Western culture reveals our fears of, and fight against, nature, including our own human nature. This ambivalence arguably lies at the heart of our current ecological crisis. In this article I will explore some of the joys and psychological challenges of returning to a more intimate relationship with the rest of nature, as we search for ways to live more lightly on the earth in the face of climate change. I will also give some examples of how we might see these issues entering into our work as therapists.

Introduction

As I cross the threshold from suburban tarmac to green meadow, the small 'I' inside me begins to expand. I have space to breathe again. The smell of damp grass and cacophony of birdsong excite my senses. The view over forest and green hills relaxes my perspective: those petty issues that were niggling earlier begin to fall away. My body comes alive as I slip into the cold waters of the women's pond. The kingfisher darts past, the cormorant fans its great black wings, the moorhens and coots are clucking and chasing each other. It is in these moments that I feel more able to fall in love with life again. From the shrieks of sensual delight that are coming from other women around me, you could mistake this for an orgy. We emerge from the pond with grins from ear to ear, the waters of the earth have satisfied us deeply. I love water, I love this pond. But it's more than that: this is an experience of falling in love with, or *coming into love*, or of *being in love* with a whole community – humans, birds, trees, water.

Perhaps many readers of this piece will remember the terrible culling of animals due to Foot and Mouth disease in 2001. We could no longer walk freely in the countryside in many parts of the UK. A friend said that losing his freedom to roam in nature was *like losing a lover*. I felt moved by his description, which suggests the earth is a *living being* with whom we can have a loving, sensual, intimate, and even erotic relationship. Thomas Berry describes our relationship with the earth as a 'communion of subjects' (Berry, 1999). This way of seeing the world is so at odds with the Western mindset, which views the earth as a collection of objects free for humans to simply take. Arguably, this consumerist attitude has brought us to a place of devastating ecological crisis.

The story which lies at the heart of this crisis is a complex one about love and attachment as well as trauma and disconnection, between humans and the earth. In this article I will start by describing some of the many different kinds of love that exist between humans and the other-than-human world. Then I will ask how that love relationship becomes blocked. In the last section I will give some examples of how these issues might come into the work of psychotherapy. I will argue that our love for, and attachment to, the more-than-human world is vital to us on many levels, including that of our psychological health.

Eros or Love?

Who is Eros? Eros is the principle of relatedness, the great binder and loosener. Eros is ultimately the desire for

wholeness, and although this may initially take the form of passionate love, it is a desire for interconnection and interaction with other sentient beings.

The antithesis of eros is Logos, the Greek term for rationality – which is about dividing, reasoning, judging, discriminating and reasoning. Jung writes:

> Eros is a questionable fellow and will always remain so.... He belongs on one side to man's primordial animal nature which will endure as long as man has an animal body. On the other side he is related to the highest forms of the spirit. But he thrives only when spirit and instinct are in right harmony.
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> (Jung, 1967a: para 32)

Eros emerged as soon as Gaia had created life and is about a primary or primal love, a life energy or force which includes the erotic, but is by no means confined to sexual love. Eros presents an image of wholeness, of connecting opposites. It is this wider meaning of Eros that I will be using in this paper.

Love for the Other-than-human World

As a child I remember falling into a doze on the lawn, smelling newly mown grass and listening to the sounds of bees as they come and go, and to the rustling of the leaves above, with my beloved dog beside me.

Now, as spring emerges after a long wet winter, I walk down our road and revel in the array of different scents which waft out of our neighbours' front gardens. I look forward to the season of soft luscious fruit, to picking my way barefoot across the sand and plunging into the sea. Already it's easy to see that one of the ways into love for the earth is through our senses; this is a whole-body experience.

There is also an experience of the sense of 'I' expanding into a more diffuse state of love, described here by Jung: 'At times I feel like I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go' (Jung, 1967b: 252).

Love and the Wild

For some years I have been co-facilitating courses for groups in wild places. Our original intention was to try to deepen experiences and conversations about living sustainably, away from consumer culture and dry factual lectures about climate change, immersed in wilderness.

During a one-week course there is a chance to have a 'solo' experience; the group is sent off in silence at dawn to find their 'spot', which they stay in until dusk. On the following morning the silence is broken and participants share the stories of their day. For most people there has been a mix of experiences: fears of wild nature, of wild animals, anxieties about the length of time with no distractions, of meeting raw nature inside and outside. It's really tough when cold and wet, but it can also offer an experience of blissfully sinking into the lap of nature.

There are many meetings with animals who are roaming freely, such as deer, sea eagles, otters, seals, wild goats, and such excitement when a creature, such as a great stag, dares to come close enough to make eye contact.

People are pushed out of their comfort zones into an unknown adventure. It's exciting. Some strip naked, wanting to meet the earth bare. Others shyly admit to feeling aroused by the immense beauty and sensual pleasures, and wish to make love, masturbating in the heather.

Yet what's most striking when the group gathers to tell their stories of the day is the expression of a deep love for the earth, reached through the senses, which emerges simply through stopping and being. Most people are left fumbling for words in the presence of such awe and beauty, often overwhelmed by tears of relief at 'coming home' – as well as tears of grief for what humans are doing to the earth.

Perhaps it is not always so easy to love other creatures and the land. What about having a relationship with rock, described by our dominant culture as 'inanimate'? Here is a story about 'becoming rock' from my co-facilitator, Dave Key. He had just completed a very enjoyable rock climb, and was set up in a hanging belay, deeply relaxed, his imagination set free, playing with shapes on the rocks on the other side of the valley. He writes:

> I was adrift in a vast ocean of pale, warm rock. ...After about ten minutes I suddenly felt myself falling.... Next, I felt this incredible wave of warmth, like diving into a tropical sea. ...I became aware of this intense calmness and I felt myself fall again, this time alarmingly backwards into the rock, *merging* with the rock face behind me. I *melted* into it, and I was suddenly aware that I was no longer a separate human form perched high on a granite wall – I *was* the granite wall... suddenly one of my tears woke me up... an awkward term because I was not asleep, I was fully aware the whole time.... I had the notion that I could easily untie the ropes and climb away without danger. I was immortal and it felt like there was no greater experience of life beyond the experience I had just had.
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> (Key, 2003: 10–11)

Dave did not speak about this experience to anyone for two years. He wanted to protect what he felt was a sacred experience, and he was afraid that others might label it as mad. More surprisingly, from this moment onwards he was propelled into a different relationship with the earth. His motivation to live sustainably had changed from a superego 'I *should* look after the earth' to a *felt bodily knowing* that he was part of the whole. For example, throwing away plastic became 'Self' damage. When he did finally open up to some rock climber friends, they exclaimed, 'Oh this happens all the time' and often leads to an embodied felt concern for the earth.

One reading of this experience is that Dave becomes intimate with rock over many years, and then some kind of union takes place, like a climax, bringing him into the presence of love, falling in love. This is not an experience of merging, as Dave makes clear that he never lost his awareness of 'I' at any time. This process reminded him that he is not a defined body but more like a cell within a larger living system – our collective body. From this perspective it is possible to understand that what we do to ourselves we do to the earth, and vice versa.

Blocks in the Pathways of Love

While this was clearly a life-changing experience for Dave, others may find such experiences of dissolving into boundlessness so frightening that the experience stops. When the small 'I' expands beyond familiar boundaries there is the danger that some may veer off into madness. This is why indigenous cultures have always recognized the need for tightly held ritual spaces to reconnect with the greater whole; sadly, Western culture has lost most of these rituals.

Dissolving into boundlessness is one of many difficult feelings that can be stirred in our relationship with the earth. There are numerous aspects of nature that humans find repulsive, frightening, overwhelming or threatening; so our gradual move 'away' from the land to build a safer and more predictable life is understandable. But that gradual withdrawal from an intimacy with the earth has had many consequences: an unfamiliarity with our own wild animal nature, a less embodied life, and a loss of loving exchange and communion with the non-human world which has provided such a great source of nourishment for human body and soul.

The ecological crisis is a call to humans to remember their ecological origins and belonging, to re-find their human identity in relation to 'the others'. To become intimate once again with the earth, to make a secure and loving attachment with the rest of nature, means facing, naming and exploring those very fears that caused us to retreat over the course of human history. What are they?

The Myth of The Fall, a myth so central to our dominant culture, provides some clues. The Garden of Eden is full of sensual delight. Yet at the centre of this story is the snake who is portrayed as seductive and erotic, luring Eve and then Adam into disobeying God by eating the apple and 'falling prey' to their senses. They are then cast out of the garden into the dusty wastelands beyond, never to return.

This story reveals a fear of being seduced by the spell of the senses, of being led into an orgy of sensuality, a fear of being unable to think, of losing the rational mind – what we imagine makes us human. Secondly, it reveals our fears of certain creatures. In mythological history the snake is seen as poisonous healer, but in the modern world it has become one-sided: cold, unfeeling, unloving, seductive and calculating. These are projections, revealing a human fear of regressing down the evolutionary scale into that imagined cold and dark reptilian world, losing our human warmth. Of course humans are capable of being some of the coldest and most calculating animals on the planet – how much easier it is to project this quality on to 'the other'. There are many other animals, such as rats, sharks or spiders, who, like the snake, hold something archetypal for humans; yet in our modern society they are simply 'vermin', to be got rid of. There is a profound fear of 'the other', of difference.

There are fears of our own animal nature: being out of control of our instincts, sexually disinhibited, aggressive, 'primitive', or over-emotional. These qualities are not only projected on to animals, but on to indigenous peoples and women. These fears can manifest in many different ways in our day-to-day lives, such as the removal of body hair and smell, the last reminders of the animal in us, seen as smelly, messy and dirty, especially for women.

There are fears of taking too much: we call pigs or obese people greedy, but we only have to take a look at the unbridled greed of consumer culture to see that this is scapegoating. We have lost the art of reciprocity, knowing that our relationship with the earth is about giving as well as taking.

There are fears of being taken by the earth: being eaten by wild animals (e.g. see the fascination with the film *Jaws*), being swallowed by earthquakes, consumed by huge waves, withered by drought. These are ancient fears of being sucked into the darkness of the earth, eaten up by Mother Earth, regressing back into the womb, fears of

an evolutionary regression into the darkness of matter.

There are fears of our vegetable and inanimate nature, turning into a couch potato or reduced to a comatose state 'like a vegetable' or completely 'stuck like a rock' falling into complete inertia, in fact the opposite to what is thought of as 'wild'.

These fears, consciously or unconsciously, underlie the current cultural resistance to facing climate change and our ecological crisis. The green life is often pictured as one of regressing to something primitive and backward, associated with the 'evils' of paganism; or it is associated with the social control of the Nazi Party, whose original ethos was very aligned to green values. These projections still pervade our culture.

Looking at this list it is easy to see how the earth could have been experienced as the traumatizing or bad mother. Spiritual transcendence has been one way to manage that trauma. Theologian Thomas Berry notes that after the devastating loss and suffering caused by the Black Plague in Europe, people felt betrayed by nature. Then the task of the spiritual person was to withdraw from the natural world, which was seen as the source of contamination, and of seduction (Berry, 1999: 77).

The other mechanism of self-protection is splitting and projection on to the 'other' of unwanted human qualities. Our cultural worldview could be seen as a good example of this: that the earth is an inanimate object; that animals are biological entities without soul, who do not feel things in the same way as humans; that humans are therefore superior with their rational minds; that consciousness exists only within humans.

How difficult it is for humans to re-establish a loving relationship with the more-than-human world that is a true intimacy, holding together the love and the fear. Our fears are very embedded in our collective unconscious and our psychological mechanisms of protection.

How do these issues come into our practice as therapists?

At present we are trained to think about love, attachment and trauma in relation to *human* relationships. Jung is one of the few psychotherapists whose writings are about the relationship with inner and outer nature. He would regularly take patients sailing on Lake Zürich. Nowadays this practice might be seen as unboundaried. The therapeutic frame has become synonymous with the room.

While human relationships are central to our lives, we are in relationship with the earth from the moment we are conceived in our mothers' watery wombs. We are born into land, with its own particular qualities and atmospheres. Many people grow up with pets who become major attachment figures within the family, and whose deaths can be their first experience of major loss and grief. Gardens, parks and beaches are places of play in which the imagination extends, where our bodies are tested against the bodies of oak and ash, where the doors to enchantment can be opened.

Peak experiences, or an experience of the numinous, are most often found in nature. Wandering outside to see a wide expanse of stars, or spending time in the mountains or by the sea, can be potent, transformative and healing. I remember arriving back from a particularly significant journey in the wilds; after describing it to my therapist for some time, he responded, 'Oh well, back to reality'. It's an easy comment to make for a therapist who has not been helped to make the connections.

There are many people who suffer within dysfunctional families and seek solace in nature, where dogs, cats and horses may provide the love and physical affection lacking at home, and where forests give peace and company. One of my clients, who suffered the most horrendous sexual torture as a child at the hands of her parents, made strong attachments to the family dog as well as to the willow tree in the garden. I think she may not have survived otherwise.

Another client grew up in the Middle East until she was eleven years old, when her family moved to the suburbs of London. She sobbed as she talked of fond memories of playing with friends in the lush cool rivers of green oases, the intense colours of the flowers. She also made expeditions with her family out into the wilds of the desert, experiencing herself as a tiny speck in the wide open spaces. The abrupt change to the cold grey streets of London suburbia was devastating, losing not only her friends but her wider roots in place. Her family seemed unable to talk about this shared loss, and not long after their return to the UK she developed an eating problem and a string of strange illnesses which seem to have been connected to unexpressed grief. Coming into therapy was the first time she had retrieved and mourned her love of place and the earth community within it.

What about when children grow up without any contact with nature? When light pollution means we no longer have access to the starry cosmos? Or when technology takes over from trees as the playmate? Or when parks become the boundaries for gang territories (as in some parts of North London) and are no longer safe to play in? Richard Louv calls this 'Nature Deficit Disorder'

(Louv, 2005), and we can only really guess at how this might affect the next generation.

There are many other ways in which child development is affected by living in Western culture. Children are so often taught to disconnect from certain aspects of the earth community, and to idealize other aspects. There is always great enthusiasm to save charismatic megafauna and endangered species such as whales, dolphins, tigers, and more; it is easy to love these animals. Slugs, rats and spiders are more difficult to love.

Furthermore, children readily accept the torture of factory farming and animal testing if their parents do not bring to light how very cruel these practices are. This means they are taught to disconnect at an early age from the pain of the non-human world; that cut requires not only a severing from the pain of the other, but also from one's own bodily empathetic pain. This is not black and white, as we know from history. An area of disconnect within can exist within anyone: white South Africans were taught that black people didn't feel pain; and it is not that long ago that Western society believed that only men had souls! My point here is to illustrate how the natural bonds and attachments to the non-human world that are formed in childhood can be disrupted by cultural attitudes.

Such experiences with the other-than-human world, both loving and traumatic, from childhood into adulthood, are there if therapists know how to listen for them. While I still very much keep to the view that I follow what the client brings, I also believe that practising therapy while holding the earth in mind can invite a wider perspective from the first session onwards. I am listening for the human story *as well* as the earth story of the client, the matrix in which the human story is planted.

Here is an example of what I am pointing to. My client Susan had been suffering from severe bulimia for many years. She arrived hating her body and she told me she felt cut off from the neck downwards. Like many women with eating problems, food had become the only source of sensual pleasure. She had no idea when she felt hungry or full, so part of the task of therapy was to help her to become more embodied, to be able to read her bodily needs, to become more in touch with her intuition (rather than trying to control her body from top down), and to find other sources of self-soothing and sensual pleasure. I would see this as all part of developing a relationship with her animal self.

Susan had grown up on a housing estate in the inner city with no connection to the land. About a year into therapy she began to experiment with gardening, with no previous experience. This was a step into self-soothing, but she soon recognized that she was bingeing on buying plants instead of food! One day she arrived in great distress. Her lupins were being eaten by slugs, and the local garden centre had given her some slug pellets to put down. The following morning she was devastated to see the carnage these pellets had caused, and how the slugs were obviously suffering a great deal. I fed back to her that she was firmly grounded and in touch with the feelings of others. But I also cautioned that when slugs are poisoned, so are the birds that eat them, and so on into the food chain. This conversation made a great impact on her, for at that moment she understood the interconnectedness of all life. She saw that she could not get rid of something in isolation, and this paralleled an inner experience of trying to get rid of feelings through eating food. Gradually, how she thought about herself in relation to the world began to change.

"...practising therapy while holding the earth in mind can invite a wider perspective."

Not long after this incident she became involved with a man who was distressed about the state of the planet. She started to bring her feelings of despair and fear about the world to therapy, and at the same time we were able to look at how this might parallel her fears about her body. Some time later she acquired an allotment and developed a very sensual relationship with growing her own food. She realized the joys of slowing down, of listening to every plant, and trusting her intuition.

I'm not claiming that this is a quick cure for bulimia. But I do think this deep connection to the other-than-human world has helped Susan to become more embodied, strengthened her confidence in her intuition and gut feelings, and provided great sensual pleasure. The many encounters she has had with plants and animals at home, on her allotment, or on journeys into wilder nature,

have offered meaningful images and metaphors which, like dreams, have helped us to navigate the difficult work of attending to her inner world.

Some therapists have taken the radical step of working outdoors. In her book *The Healing Fields* (2002), psychotherapist Jenny Grut describes her work with asylum seekers and refugees on allotments in North London, a project within the Medical Foundation for The Care of Victims of Torture. Grut believed that because their human relationships had been so profoundly broken, they needed to start by making a relationship with the land, plants and animals. Not to be confused with horticultural therapy, Jenny used the potent metaphors of gardening in the therapy dialogue.

Some Final Reflections

Falling in love is not only for human relationships but extends into our relationships with the rest of nature; we can love other creatures, elements, place or country. In fact when we are denied a relationship with the more-than-human world, perhaps there is too great a concentration on finding human love?

Throughout this piece I have tried to show how our human love for the rest of nature can exist on many different levels. At one end of the spectrum is the more everyday experience of our love for gardens or pets, or the joy of walking in the park or by the sea. At the other end of the spectrum there is a more mystical experience of moving beyond the small 'I' into an experience of deep love, feeling at one with the rest of life. These experiences of love are as essential as our deep attachment, bonding and love for and with other humans. In each case, love can be profoundly healing, but it is not a simple experience. It is fraught with the possibilities of getting hurt and building defence structures against this pain. I have tried to show that humans have created defence structures over the course of developing modern life. In search of a safer life, we have moved away from an intimate relationship with the rest of nature and now find ourselves disconnected from a profound source of nourishment. Climate change is part of the crisis that is calling us back to find a more intimate relationship with the other-than-human world. This is potentially part of a collective healing that is taking place in many places of the world, and one which could be very powerful if brought into the awareness of the work of psychotherapy.

Using case material I have tried to illustrate that the practice of bringing the ecological into psychological work is complex and can move between indoors and outdoors, building bridges between inner and outer worlds. This is a far cry from the simplistic notion that if we go into nature then all will be healed. Richard Mabey, author of *Nature Cure*, describes how 'simplistic ecotherapy is insulting to the complexity of human nature and even more importantly insulting to the complexity of nature'.

Mary-Jayne Rust is an ecopsychologist and psychotherapist of 35 years experience, inspired by trainings in art therapy, feminist psychotherapy and Jungian analysis. Journeys to Ladakh in the early 1990s alerted her to the seriousness of the ecological crisis, and its cultural, economic and spiritual roots. Alongside her therapy practice she teaches ecopsychology, a growing field of inquiry into the psychological dimensions of ecological crisis. Her publications can be found on www.mjrust.net, and include *Vital Signs: Psychological Responses to Ecological Crisis* (co-edited with Nick Totton, Karnac Books, London, 2011).

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