

Transpersonal patterns in the Natural Change Project

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This article describes a process of psychological change experienced by participants in the Natural Change Project. The project is based on a programme of wilderness experiences, therapeutic group work, creative process and one-to-one support. It is designed to catalyse and support leadership towards a more ecologically sustainable future among people with social and political influence. This research shows that such a programme can lead to a profound shift in sense of self, from one focused on ego identity to one that is transpersonal and ecological.

Keywords: natural change; transpersonal; ecopsychology; wilderness; triskele; ecology; social change

Introduction

The Natural Change Project is an innovative approach to catalysing leadership towards a more ecologically sustainable future. Unlike most change programmes, which depend on traditional moral and intellectual responses, Natural Change invites a shift in sense of self as a basis for action. When the self is experienced and understood as a part of nature, activism emerges naturally.

The Natural Change Project is based on a series of wilderness residentials, interspersed with urban-based workshops. It combines understandings from transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology with intense experiences of wild places. The process is supported by ongoing mentoring, creative expression and sharing of experience through public internet blogs. Eighteen people from public, private and non-governmental organization (NGO) sectors have participated in the project's two programmes to date, which ran in 2008 and 2010. All these participants were chosen for their capacity to influence cultural and professional networks in Scottish society. The project is described in detail elsewhere (WWF, 2011).

The author, who designed and facilitated the programmes, saw a pattern emerging in the participants' experience of change. It seems that the change process follows a path through three distinct but dynamic phases, each separated by a liminal period of psychological disquiet and uncertainty. As participants journey through this pattern, the data suggest that they experience a shift from a narrow 'skin-bound' sense of self to one that is transpersonal and ecological.

The shift to a wider sense of self has been extensively described in transpersonal psychology (e.g. Daniels, 2005; Firman & Gila, 1997; Washburn, 1995). It has also

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been identified in an ecological context in transpersonal ecology (Fox, 1990) and deep ecology (Naess, 1986). However, the process and practices by which this shift happens in an ecological context have not previously been investigated in detail, as far as the author is aware.

This article is an attempt to describe the process of change witnessed in the Natural Change Project and to identify some theoretical points of reference. It is also an account of the author's professional practice – some 'field notes' that, it is hoped, will be useful in designing future programmes.

Methodology

A modification of Sela-Smith's (2002) Heuristic Self-Search Inquiry, presented elsewhere as an 'intersubjective-heuristic' method for ecopsychology research (Kerr & Key, 2011a; Key & Kerr, 2011) was used. First observations came after the Natural Change participants developed visual models of their own collective change process during the project (Figures 1 and 2). From this starting point, shifts in language, metaphor, content, style, themes and in the visual narratives which emerged in participants' blogs (WWF, 2008, 2010) were explored. The author's own parallel experiences in wild places were also reflected upon.

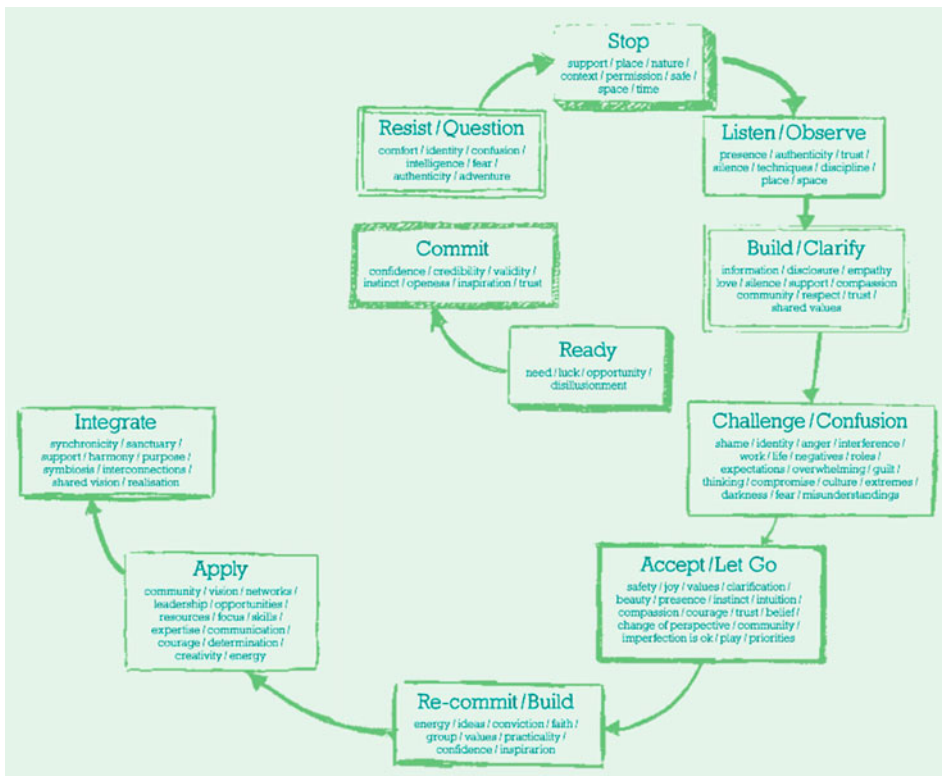


Figure 1. Natural Change 2008 – group model of change process.



Figure 2. Natural Change 2010 – group model of change process.

Findings have been illustrated with quotations taken directly from the Natural Change blogs, in order to ground this work firmly in lived experience.

The triskele

The pattern observed in the participants’ change process can be visualized as a journey through a triple spiral form, or triskele (Figure 3). This is an ancient form which has been found carved on rocks at Neolithic sites throughout Europe. There has been much speculation about its meaning, but what remains clear is that since Neolithic times it has retained a powerful symbolic attraction for many cultural groups from early Celtic Christians to modern Neo-pagans.

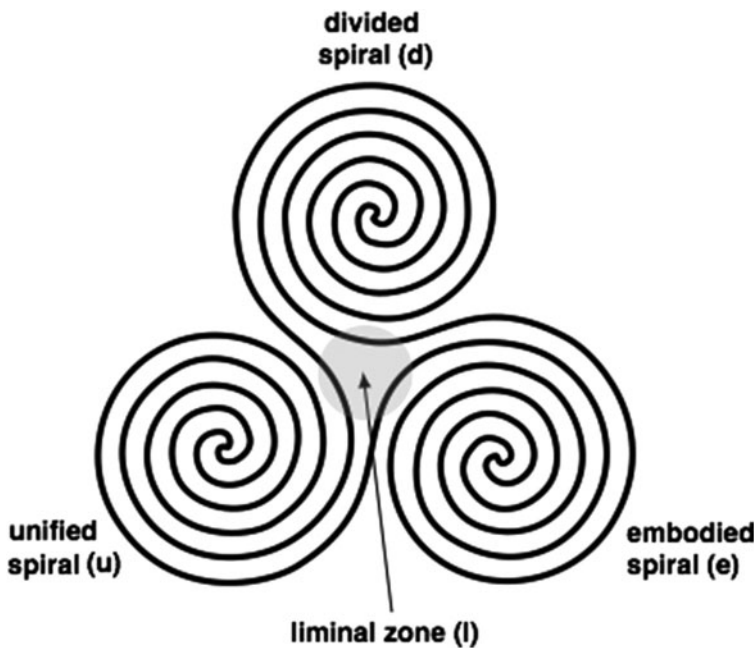


Figure 3. Triskele.

The journey through each individual spiral in the triskele represents the emergence of previously unconscious phenomena into conscious awareness. An important point is reached at the centre of each spiral. Here, there is a release into the emergent process. Unfamiliar phenomena that arise are no longer resisted with old coping strategies; instead, they start to be accepted as a meaningful part of a new experience of self (Figure 4).

The journey into and out of the centre of each spiral is not usually equal in length of time or emotional intensity. It is a complex process, and each journey has a distinct rhythm and pace. The transition zone between one spiral and the next represents a period of unease and confusion – a liminal state. In this phase, the potential to go either way is strongly present. Moving forward feels fearful and unknown while moving back feels familiar but futile. This zone occupies the centre of the triskele as it is common to the process of moving between all three of the spirals (1, Figure 3).

The process of the journey is iterative, and never reaches an end-point. However, each successive pass through the triskele brings new awareness and more capacity for action in the world. Flow through this form, if unimpeded, is in a forward direction. However, fear or lack of support during the process can cause the traveller to stall at any part of the journey. This can create stagnation, and manifest as the ‘shadow’ side of the process, which is discussed in detail later.

The description below follows a journey around the triskele, illustrated with examples taken from Natural Change Project participants’ writings. For reference, each stage described is marked on Figure 3.

Spirals

The divided spiral (d)

At the start of the first spiral, the ego is dominant and the world is understood in dualistic terms. The main perspective is human or anthropocentric: people experience themselves as observers divided from the rest of nature, often with an attendant fear of the unknown.

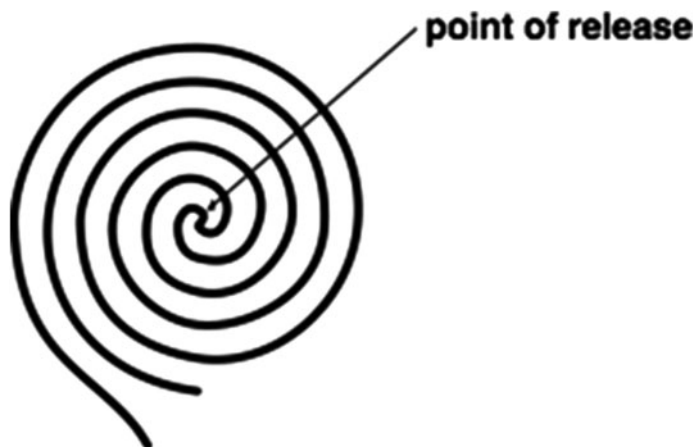


Figure 4. Single spiral from the triskele.

Generally speaking, I'm not very good with nature. I like to think that I am and that I love animals and being outdoors; however, I am really scared of certain animals coming near me and me being in their territory and their world.

Nature as a 'whole', if acknowledged at all, is conceptualized as a complex machine – a cybernetic whole (e.g. Bateson, 1972). There is the sense of a 'grand project', the end of which is attainable as our human triumph over all the mysteries of the universe. The term 'nature in mind' fits this spiral well. Consciousness is considered the sole privilege of humans, and this assumption is used to justify the attempt to control the rest of nature.

The first spiral describes the worldview of industrial growth culture. It is very difficult to feel this worldview from within it, so it tends to be invisible in everyday life. However, there is often a distant gnawing feeling that there must be something 'more' to life.

The process of change starts when this feeling of incompleteness is stimulated, and a desire to become more conscious of an alternative grows. A participant's blog from the first Natural Change workshop demonstrates this nascent awareness:

The situation we face is this: people have a wealth of information (about climate change), awareness is high but lifestyle change is low. The model of straightforward rationality isn't working. Social marketing remains nascent and unproven in its effectiveness. Something deeper, intuitive, reconnected to the earth may be needed to re-establish bonds of care and a reorientation towards a sense of planetary dwelling that is sustaining self, community and future.

Moving out of the first spiral is often traumatic. This is because a deeply embedded, perhaps lifelong way of being is starting to be left behind. The temptation is to step back in, or not step fully out – to falter. Certainly, this is often a time when participants get angry with the facilitators or others in the group, feel lost and alone and want to give up. Defences can be very strong, and they can win – providing a sound rationale for giving up and going 'back'.

So yes, I consume in order to chase the parts of the dream I can – generally high-end, high-street adaptations and homages with the occasional high-octane designer purchase thrown in, usually as a reward to myself. And it does make me feel better. I walk taller. I'm happier when I look in the mirror. I can face the world with my chin up. Bring it on. It's an absolute, intrinsic part of my identity.

However, as participants move beyond the first spiral, it becomes more clearly visible, and its limitations as a story for understanding the world become increasingly apparent.

Maybe I'm in a culture shock of sorts. The guilt flight back from London City to Glasgow really was disgusting. Cramming ourselves in a pressurized tube, hurtling together at hundreds of mph, breathing one another's breath, sweating one another's sweat. Scrambling for phones, PDAs and laptops, ordering cabs, grasping bags of duty free. I was dismayed by the pace and wastefulness of our consumption culture, now I am more disgusted. So what am I going to do about it? What do I do next? What do I not do next?

Many experiences that were previously a normal part of everyday life start to feel stressful and frustrating. This leaves participants in a vulnerable and confusing liminal state (l).

I realize that in order to survive, to get through our daily lives, we attach importance to very little that is really important. I've been stuck in my head. I've been seeking (even moments of) clarity and ways to define the 'problem' but it's just a big woolly mess and I'm getting myself tied up in knots over it.

In the divided spiral, nature is perceived as separate from the self – a state that is considered healthy and normal in industrial culture. If we reject this idea of separation from nature, we can feel temporarily alienated from the social world we are used to. Ironically, this can intensify feelings of loss and longing, and make us grasp half-heartedly at things that offer a connection back to a familiar but rejected culture.

I see a price label – £6.99 – on the mountain path. A pang of longing for the solid place where everything has a price ... some other humans have been here. Somehow that matters. I grasp after the chance to define myself in the old way – the way that's not possible now I'm out here. Even though I know that doesn't really work.

However, at the edge of this sense of loss and alienation, the second spiral comes into view.

The embodied spiral (e)

As participants start to enter the second spiral, they relinquish the compulsion to understand the world only rationally and intellectually, to 'own it' through knowledge. At this point they become open to more sensory and experiential ways of 'Being' in the world (after Fromm, 1976).

Now, they become aware that there is a great deal of reality that is beyond human knowledge, that is and always will be deeply mysterious. The mind becomes quiet, while the senses and the body start to engage much more fully. Hot and cold, light and dark, dry and wet – feelings and sensations come to dominate the focus of attention.

I can see stunning colours and contrasts; beeches and birch trees standing out against the deep green of the Scots Pine; bright oranges and yellows, deep russets, luminous and translucent greens, grey, browns and blacks. I can see the trees and the ground all covered with a rich carpet of mosses and trees covered in lichens.

The stillness of the present moment is often punctuated by existential fears – of falling, becoming lost, ill, alone, unable to cope physically and psychologically. And with extreme euphoria, playful revelling in the bliss of the animal body, and feeling cradled in the body of the Earth. Often at this stage, participants experience a cathartic release of long-held emotions and memories, particularly grief and early trauma. Some participants may also connect to experiences of collective trauma in the unconscious and in the land (Bache, 2000; Kerr & Key, 2011b).

These experiences require careful psychotherapeutic holding. This is not only offered by the facilitators but also by the group, and the place in which they are working.

So how do you explain dancing at the top of a mountain, laughing uncontrollably, roaring with anger and frustration? ... I thought I was mad. I thought I was experiencing some sort of breakdown. Come to think of it, I probably was. I was going through the breakdown of emotional and psychological effects of being all by myself all the way up a mountain. I began to feel like the earth ... was looking after me. As I curled up to fit into the dry space, it felt as though I was a small child being held in the protective arms of the earth. A foetus curled up and safe in the womb. I felt quite sleepy. It was a strange but comforting feeling.

Often language becomes difficult, and images and symbols emerge as more adequate forms for communication, sense-making and reflection.

When words ‘fail’ us or we experience ineffability, could this be because we are experiencing the world from a different, more ancient, consciousness? Is it possible to experience reality without the mediating effects of language? Language defines us as humans and plays a triumphant role in defending our egos. Who are we, and what does it mean when we cannot access words? I am beginning to get the message that the more extended our concept of self and the more permeable our ego-boundaries, the more likely we are to find out.

As with moving beyond the first spiral, going through the second spiral leads into a liminal state (I). Experiences have become embodied and ‘trans-rational’ – they are beyond the rational intellect (Bernstein, 2005). And yet they are absolutely real. Like being in terrain with no map, no guiding framework to help navigate – just the forms of the land to work from. In some ways, this stage feels the most psychologically challenging because the journey has already been fully committed to by moving through the second spiral: there’s no going back, but the third spiral is still not visible. The potential to fall psychologically between two places is very real, although there is also a sense that another spiral will appear – as the second one did after the uncertainty that preceded it: ‘Decongest[ing] the brain and body from everything else is liberating, however [it is] bringing new senses of insecurity’.

Despite the sense of uncertainty, there is now a strong preference for the ‘domain of Being’, where the self is experienced as immanent in nature. The ‘domain of Having’, which was the mark of the divided spiral, has been left behind (Batchelor, 1983; Fromm, 1976). As one participant succinctly put it at Christmas, ‘I’ll have presence over presents any day please’.

From here, the transition to the third spiral often happens suddenly and unexpectedly. In that way, it can be thought of as a kind of ‘shamanic transition’ (Kailo, 1998; Kerr & Key, 2011a) or ‘bifurcation point’ (Capra, 1996), where one pattern of self transforms
instantaneously into another.

The unified spiral (u)

In this spiral, the mythological, trans-rational world emerges into full view: transpersonal experiences start to make sense and are recognized as valid (Kailo, 1998; Kerr & Key, 2011a).

As the wind blows, autumn leaves flutter down, falling on my face. I begin to wonder what it would be like to lie here for ever, slowly being covered by leaves, dissipating outwards, becoming part of the living entity that is a forest floor ... what the world

would look like if you could take away everything but the life that inhabits it ... an intricate, sparkling silver web; each life forming a knot in the threads, constantly ravelling and unravelling.

Mind is now in nature. The self is experienced as both immanent and aware. 'I' becomes part of a collective ecological reality, shared by all beings on an equal footing. Experiences of personal and collective suffering are felt as part of a wider reality which naturally contains darkness and light (Kerr & Key, 2011b).

The dark edging slope in pink shade, skeleton trees overhead.

The fine winter sun trickles through me. Then a tractor sounds basses and booming.

In the field there are furrow white lines, to stone dykes and the shadows their spines.

And the rocks hold my head as it fills with the soundings of wind as it swells...

Some close, whisper flutter, cool strokes. And further, tide drags from shore stones.

Then crescendo – a threat – sheet of steel is being beaten and shaken and peals...

From so soft to much harder and faster,

And louder and colder and force

In my face and my space and then – done –

To a ripple of sound, and then none.

'Incompleteness', writes Christopher Bache (2000), 'is the cost we pay for beginning to appreciate the true dimensions of our existence' (p. xviii). In the third spiral our knowledge of the world feels incomplete in a new way – the mystery has deepened so much that we are now in humble awe of it. This shifts us from being frightened of giving up the grand project of absolute knowledge to feeling that we are emerging as part of a process that is greater than anything we will ever be able to comprehend. This is a point of release into the mystery, where we can feel the potential it holds: 'I look up – it is absolutely magical here. Words fail to describe the beauty of the scene before my eyes ... is the message "stop looking so hard – I have all that I need" ...?'

The resistance and fear felt from fighting to maintain an encapsulated, divided self falls away, and participants experience a profound sense of acceptance. The intense energy needed to hold the self as separate from 'other' – in the hope of finding a distinct social identity that conforms to the demands of the divided spiral – is released. This feels like a relief, a surrender into something compassionate and safe. It is also deeply empowering, and participants start to find agency in the world.

All of us on the project have had powerful spiritual experiences that have stretched and taken us beyond ourselves. The beginnings of inner change, that need [to be] released [so that they can] lead into personal action and social change.

As I relax into this place, I feel in the centre of my chest, a deep tenderness – like I'm touching something right at the heart of my own Being. Like I'm held in the heart of this place, and it in me ... and I would do anything to protect this place, and I am so grateful.

... there is a definite will that didn't exist before, which now comes from my heart, not just my head.

There are two delicious paradoxes in this process: the less we know, the more meaningful our experience of the world; and the more able we are to accept our own insignificance, the more agency we have.

Now, the journey through the previous spirals starts to become visible as a whole process. Looking back, the myopia experienced in the first spiral appears surprising, unbelievable. The pain of the liminal states makes sense, and the descent into the sensory body of the Earth in the second spiral is felt as the touchstone of authentic selfhood.

... take something with you

Totemic not tokenistic

Source of the story

Reservoir of the passion

Touchstone and talisman

Anchor to the authentic

The 'return' to action in a world dominated by the first spiral may be both traumatic and joyful. Either way, the trace of a new perspective is still strongly present. While this does not remove all the difficulties and pain, it does provide an important insight about how to proceed. Whenever the divisions and intellectual dead-ends of the first spiral threaten to become overwhelming, we can – for example, by seeking out solitude in a wild place – deliberately enter the second spiral and start to release into a wisdom that comes from beyond the ego.

This process of intentionally engaging with the second spiral is fundamentally important, as it makes the triskele pattern a dynamic practice rather than a static model. As we have seen, activities that give an embodied experience of the self as part of the rest of nature (including the human community) are a gateway to the third spiral, where the difficulties of everyday life can be actively accepted and transformed into action. The rational and intellectual perspectives that dominate Western culture can be balanced with a transpersonal, trans-rational understanding (Tacey, 2009). This allows us to inhabit our divided culture more skilfully, with a keen eye on the collective ecological good.

If I manage, even just once a month, a walk on the beach or a trip to a forest, that will keep the connection alive, as well as keep the passion to make sure I'm one of the ones who tread lightly.

Spiral shadows

The conscious mind can easily miss some of the more counter-productive phenomena that are present in every process. It is therefore vital to be aware that each spiral comes with its own unconscious shadow. The shadow starts to dominate if someone gets trapped in a particular spiral and cannot move forward. This is most likely to

happen as a result of unresolved personal trauma, especially childhood experiences of loss, shame and abandonment. Old psychological wounds can be reopened, and insecurities from early life re-stimulated as a new sense of self is invited.

The following discussion explores how this trauma might lead the shadow of each spiral to manifest in individual and organizational contexts.

Divided spiral shadow

For most people, the divided spiral offers a relatively stable ego identity that is familiar from everyday life (Washburn, 1995). Adopting a strong ego identity can 'cover over' injuries to self-worth that have been sustained in early life. Moving beyond the divided spiral feels unfamiliar, and can bring a frightening sense of lack and vulnerability, as the old ego identity disintegrates. This can potentially re-expose childhood insecurities.

If this vulnerability is not held in an empathic relationship there can be a tendency to compensate by quickly adopting a new identity as, for example, an 'environmental activist'. Although this new identity is different from the old one, it is still the product of coping with a fragile self that is divided from the rest of nature. It is as if one suit of armour has been exchanged for another (for further exploration of this process, see, for example, Silverman, 1983).

Underneath the armour, the sense of lack and vulnerability remains. The protagonist becomes bound to the futile task of trying to maintain their new identity. This leaves little energy to meet their heightened concerns about ecological threats, feeding a process of exhaustion and impotency.

Another consequence of the effort to maintain a new identity is that the rejected, old identity is projected out onto others, who become demonized in the process. So, for example, a champion of capitalism may become an ardent environmental activist ... and a vitriolic critic of former friends and colleagues in the business world.

This can be seen in many sectors of the contemporary environmental movement, where the government, corporations and the media are cited as being the ultimate cause of environmental problems. The irony is, of course, that those doing the demonizing fail to recognize that they are a part of the groups they reject. They are rejecting or denying an aspect of themselves.

Sometimes the divided spiral shadow can be seen in an institutional context. What is purposefully rejected in an organization's public remit emerges in the structure of the organization itself. For example, a charity that campaigns for freedom and human rights may be riddled with stifling bureaucracy and abuses of power. The features of a divided worldview are still dominant – perhaps even more so – but they become invisible (unconscious) to the members of the organization.

These shadow patterns can lead people to burn out, and organizations to ossify. The most rejected parts of our unsustainable culture can become unconsciously embedded in the institutions and activists who most seek to challenge it.

Embodied spiral shadow

The journey through the second spiral opens us to our vulnerability, which offers a valuable opportunity for healing. However, situations where we feel vulnerable can also connect us to past experiences of traumatic relationships and make us regress to early ways of relating, where the world is felt as 'all good' or 'all bad' (Segal, 1973).

If this tendency is not made conscious, and if it does not feel safe to express emotions such as anger, sadness, loneliness or fear, wider nature can be romanticized and sentimentalized so that it is seen as only 'good'. Anthropomorphic or idealizing perspectives which fit the 'good' label are sought, and there is a strong tendency to avoid experiences of nature which involve risk, inconvenience or discomfort.

However, as long as this idealization remains, the experience of being emotionally held in wider nature will always feel incomplete and therefore untrustworthy, with a sense of invisible threat. This insecurity can sometimes lead people into New Age style practices which only allow 'positive' experiences of humans and the rest of nature – in search of safety and a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, any practice that is based on an idealization will at best act as a temporary palliative, and at worst increase the sense of threat (Tacey, 2001).

Unified spiral shadow

The third spiral opens our awareness to mythic and archetypal realms which can provide inspiration and guidance if we relate to them consciously. However, if our relationship to them is less conscious, we can become 'possessed' by them and act unskillfully.

The unconscious lure of myths and archetypes is strong, especially if we have unhealed childhood wounds. Identifying with archetypes such as the Hero, the Princess and the Warrior is a normal part of childhood development. At that stage of life, we are very open to the collective unconscious, and it is natural to take comfort and refuge in the mythic world, especially in stressful and traumatic situations.

As adults, when our childhood vulnerability is stimulated or untended we can, once again, unconsciously resort to the world of archetypes to validate and protect our sense of being. If we unconsciously identify with an archetype, this invites a powerful influx of psychic energy which inflates the ego. At best, this will disconnect us from our vulnerability and humanity, and stop us from relating to each other authentically; at worst, it can lead to narcissistic abuses of power. The danger in the third spiral is that we can come to believe that we have 'the answer', and then heroically assert this onto the world. This can be further exacerbated in some institutional cultures that support a strongly didactic approach to knowledge. In these contexts, leaders can become idealized as 'gurus' who hold special power, disempowering those around them.

Another shadow of this spiral is 'spiritual bypassing' (Masters, 2010). Here, psychological trauma and emotional wounds are bypassed by intense spiritual practice. Difficulties in relationships which arise from destructive interpersonal patterns are seen as irrelevant compared to the grand enterprise of attaining spiritual 'enlightenment' or 'evolution'.

Because the void created by early relational wounds cannot be filled by spiritual practice alone, the search for more powerful spiritual experiences can become compulsive – a form of 'spiritual materialism' that appears to promise fulfilment but never satisfies (Trungpa, 1973). Intense experiences may be sought after as commodities isolated from the context of human and ecological community (Ferrer, 2001). In this way, there are strong parallels with the empty promises offered by consumer culture.

In essence, the shadow of the third spiral is of ego inflation, spiritual bypassing and spiritual materialism. These can seriously curtail the capacity for effective, compassionate action in the world because service is to the ego alone, rather than the ego as part of wider nature.

The triskele pattern shadow

The shadow of the triskele as a whole is cast if it is seen as some kind of ascendant or hierarchical process. It describes an infinite practice with an archetypal intent (Stevens, 1982) to support and catalyse change for an ecologically sustainable future. This practice does not provide access to a generalized higher order of consciousness. It simply gives access to material from the personal and collective unconscious that might otherwise be missed.

The shadow of the triskele is that it is viewed as a Grand Theory of psychological change (placing it squarely in the shadow of the divided spiral!).

Practice

When viewed as a whole, the triskele is a continuous line. There are no hierarchies, or evolutionary ‘levels’ of development. The triskele can only be practised, it can never be completed or ‘attained’.

In the Natural Change Project, all the participants struggled on their return to daily life because it is dominated by the divided spiral of industrial growth culture. It is easy to become trapped there – to lose perspective – and find that we have lost creativity, motivation and clarity.

This research suggests that deliberately engaging the embodied and sensory world of the second spiral allows the third one to take form. An immersion into ‘wildness’ can release us from the destructive and overwhelming power of the divided spiral, and from its stifling limitations. From here we are released into new opportunities and potentials that are not visible from within our dominant industrial culture.

In the Natural Change Project we do not only work in remote, wild places. We also work extensively in urban and rural locations. The aim is to help create the conditions where people can open to a different sense of self wherever they are. However, experience shows that creating these conditions in the first instance happens most easily through unmediated experiences of physically wild places. From this touchstone of personal experience, participants are encouraged to integrate their wild consciousness into their daily lives, communities and habitats. Once the wild touchstone has been found and has become familiar, the process can be engaged more intentionally. Also, successful previous experiences make it easier to trust and surrender to the practice wholeheartedly.

Each journey through the triskele brings into consciousness new forms of previously unconscious material, regardless of the amount of practice already done. This means that the journey is never completed – there is always more that could emerge. The unconscious is mysterious and infinite.

Conclusion

The process of journeying through the triskele opens to an increasingly wider sense of self, until the self is experienced as being a fully interrelated part of the physical and metaphysical world. This is analogous to the shift beyond egoic experience in transpersonal ecology (Fox, 1990), to the idea of the ecological self explored through the deep ecology movement (Naess, 1986) and is described in many spiritual traditions and cultures.

The ecological reality is this: we are completely dependent for our survival on the rest of nature. Physically, we cannot exist as encapsulated beings. This is the case psychologically too – our psyche is sustained by its connection to the ‘soul of the world’ (Romanyshyn, 2007). In this way, the practice described here re-aligns participants psychologically with what they actually are ecologically – infinitely interconnected. Shifting this ‘what’ demands a shift in ‘who’, a change in sense of self.

Finally, and most importantly, this shift to an ecological self catalyses and supports action towards living within our planet’s physical, psychological and spiritual ecology (WWF, 2011).

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