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We the human animals: exploring an embodied, relational and wild approach to therapy

Allison Priestman*

Private practice, Stroud, UK

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In this article I ask the question: what does an embodied, relational and wild therapeutic approach look like? In answering, I look at my own annual withdrawal from my garden, and link it with humanity's historical withdrawal from an intimate, sensual relationship with the other-than-human and more-than-human, highlighting the privileging in our culture of rational and intellectual modes of consciousness, and the denigration of the instinctual and the wild. I offer the concept of trance states as a way to conceptualize working relationally with wildness in the client–therapist dyad. Wild Mind is introduced as a way to listen to the wider, wild intelligence which is a part of us, and of which we are a part.

Keywords: ecopsychology; Wild Mind; embodiment; trance; altered states

> We seem, today, so estranged from the stars, so utterly cut off from the world of hawk and otter and stone.
>
> (Abram, 1996, p. 261)

In the garden

It's frosty outside, and a thin white blanket lies over the still bright, green grass, a hoar frost crusting the trees. It's cold but I'm deeply relieved, the first real frost of the year here. I was picking nasturtiums and marigolds, vibrant oranges for the kitchen, only yesterday. A lovely sight, these late garden flowers and treasured, but received with a measure of confusion. Late November 2014 and still so warm, late November and half the leaves still on the trees, late November and no sign of winter approaching.

I garden with my partner on a steep piece of land just outside of Stroud in Gloucestershire, UK. I've drawn deep pleasure from gardening for the past 20 years within 30 miles of this spot. It was not part of my upbringing, or my direct inheritance, to be this linked into the rhythms and seasons of the land. This year, greatly enthused by our projects for cultivating more bulbs, grasses, roses, shrubs, vegetables, berries and fruits, I have decided to carry on working outside through the wet and cold months. Most years, in November, December and January I make my retreat, and disengage from active involvement with the garden … and each year something falls asleep in me – rather, something diminishes, something intangible

*Email: info@allisonpriestman.co.uk

fades. This year, I know as I slip around in the mud and feel the pain of my cold fingers that something is kept awake and enlivened by being outside cultivating the earth, but more importantly, cultivating my direct active relationship with the earth. In previous years I have been called out again by the first snowdrops, who wordlessly remind me of my joy in the beauty of the other-than-human; who quietly help to realign me. What is it that fades and diminishes when I turn away from the land? It's something bright and deep which is touched and nourished, usually only by long walks in the wild, contact with the garden, by the sight, smell, touch, taste and texture of the soil, the bluebells, the buzzards and the rocks.

I could write much more about this bright something deep within me, but what interests me also right now is the turning away, the disconnect. It feels part of the much bigger turning away by humans, especially in Western cultures. I am drawn to explore some of the roots of that disconnect, that turning away, culturally and psychologically. Ecopsychology (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Rust & Totton, 2012) has made the links repeatedly and eloquently about how our disconnection from the earth leads us to widespread abuse and turning a blind eye to the destruction and destitution of the earth, and to the communities of beings who live here.

It feels that it is part of the modern condition to be disconnected, to a lesser or greater degree, from the earth and its rhythms and the other animals who live with us. But also alongside this, many of us feel a deep anguish, fear and grief at the abuse and loss of the other-than-human: 'Now we have lost the certainty that we will have a future. I believe that this loss, felt at some level of consciousness by everyone, regardless of political orientation, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time' (Macy, 1991, p. 5).

Our disconnection

I want to explore the impact that our disconnect, our turning away has on the earth and on ourselves. How it costs us to move away from an intimate relationship with the earth. David Abram and Nick Totton are two writers among many who create compelling narratives to explain our species' disconnect from the other-than-human and more-than-human. These are two different but supportive viewpoints. It's hard to know the 'true' historical reasons for the severing of our once intimate and reciprocal relationship with the animate earth. These two perspectives may only be metaphors for what must have been a complex and multifaceted shift in our place in the world.

> Our senses are now coupled synaesthetically, to these printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar trees, ravens and the moon. As the hills and the bending grasses once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so these written letters and words speak to us. (Abram, 1996, p. 138)

David Abram's poetic and inspiring *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) explores in depth the change in human consciousness that occurred with the adoption of phonetic writing. He eloquently describes how our collective thought structures moved, from a sensuous, profoundly embodied style of consciousness, to a more detached abstract mode of thinking engendered by alphabetic literacy. Abram, an ecologist and philosopher, deeply influenced by phenomenology, explores in depth the difference between oral/indigenous and literate cultures; deep differences in our

relationship to time, to spirit, to language, to embodiment and to all other forms of life.

He questions whether, in our move from an intimate, sensual, embodied relationship with the other-than-human and more-than-human, to a more self-reflective, abstract, disembodied way of being, we have cast a spell over ourselves. 'To learn to spell was also … to step under the influence of the written letters ourselves, to cast a spell upon our own senses' (Abram, 1996, p. 133).

In *Wild Therapy* (2011) Nick Totton focuses on human society's transition from foraging to agriculture, to explore the roots of humanity's disconnect from the earth. As a body psychotherapist Totton centres his arguments around the themes of control and embodiment, describing indigenous peoples as wild or undomesticated cultures, who are participating human members of wild ecosystems. The forager world-view is to perceive the environment as a benign, spiritual home, where there is no need for control, or to manipulate or change their environment (Totton, 2011, p. 63).

Totton quotes Richard Sorenson, an anthropologist who developed the terms 'pre-conquest consciousness' and 'liminal consciousness' to describe forager people. Sorenson describes people and communities who exhibit

> an infant and child nurture that spawns an intuitive group rapport … outstanding psychological condition [of] heartfelt rapprochement based on integrated trust … a constant co-operative usage of the implements and materials of life for collective benefit. The forcing of others to one's will [is viewed as] a disruptive and unwholesome practice. It was not seen … In the real life of these preconquest people, feeling and awareness are focused on at-the-moment, point-blank sensory experience – as if the nub of life lay within that complex flux of collective sentient immediacy. (Sorenson, 1998, pp 80–83)

Nick Totton writes:

> In the move from hunter gatherer society to agriculture, human beings tried to gain control over the world, over each other, and over the other-than-human and more-than-human. In doing this we split ourselves off from the world – it became in fact our 'environment' rather than the whole of which we are an integral part … By trying to control the world we have made it other and therefore dangerous and frightening. (Totton, 2011, p. 2)

Totton also argues that we have thus become domesticated, and that as a side-effect of this we have become disembodied and alienated from direct experience of bodily emotions and impulses.

Abram and Totton emphasize different aspects of this fork in the road for humanity, but aspects that they describe which oral/indigenous consciousness and pre-conquest/wild consciousness have in common are: a sensitive attunement to our sensory relationship with the world; a belief in the power of animals and plants to speak, and that this communication is possible and desirable; the belief that humans are part of the whole; a belief in the sacredness of the earth.

As I write, I am aware of my bias towards oral, indigenous, wild ways of being. I'm in danger, perhaps, of prioritizing this way of being over a more rational, intellectual approach to life. This is a deep-seated response in me to the privileging in our culture of the rational and intellectual, and the denigration of the instinctual and

wild. Abram noted that 'the literate intellect certifies its domain by claiming the sensuous life of the body in nature as subordinate' (Abram, 1996, p. 122). A hierarchy of polarized opposites exists in our psyche. Nick Totton describes this as 'The List': a system of matched, binary opposites, which structures our thinking (Totton, 2011, p. 12). The first in each set is seen as better, higher, more advanced, and the second as lower, more primitive: mind/body, conscious/unconscious, male/female, light/dark, culture/nature, thoughts/feeling, civilized/wild. He argues that this binary thinking is behind much of humanity's abuse of each other, and the earth. This internal hierarchy of values logged in our unconscious helps to explain the motivations behind colonialism, racism, sexism and the systematic abuse of other animals.

In Western cultures, thinking is privileged over feeling; being in our minds is seen as more important than being in our bodies. Intellectualism is given high status within our culture; people with learning disabilities are given very low status. We all experience immense explicit and implicit pressure to conform, as if culturally, we are given a blueprint of how to organize our consciousness, and oppression results if we don't conform to the expected desirable way of being.

What does this mean in the therapy room?

Day-to-day as a psychotherapist, I see people struggling with these polarities of their experience and the internalized oppression that results. As a body psychotherapist, the usual hierarchy can, with some clients, be given a different slant. Many people who come to see me do so with the desire to be more embodied, more expressive, more in touch with their feelings. This in turn can actually set up a complex new set of assumptions and values on top of more unconscious blocks. My work, in the main, is to support people to connect and give more space to the second of each set of the list, to give more emphasis to the body, the unconscious, the intuitive, feeling and the wild side of themselves. This side is often in dire need of support. Ultimately I see my work as supporting clients to have access to all parts of themselves, the intuitive and rational, the dreaming and the logical.

Central to my therapeutic approach is to work with relationship and embodiment, but increasingly I am opening this out to consider what it means to work ecologically. I am interested to explore what it means to work ecologically, or as a wild therapist. My thinking and practice of wild ways of working is deeply influenced by Nick Totton and his book *Wild Therapy* (2011). Wildness I see as the tendency to connect, to entangle, to network, to become more complex; it is innate in all living systems, including ourselves. Totton writes that wildness is the first nation of human culture, the ground of being. He argues that a part of what clients encounter in therapy is precisely their own wildness, the spontaneous complexity and creative/destructive energy of their unconscious process (Totton, 2011). Wildness can seem to be chaotic, without rule or order, but as Jay Griffiths (2006) has noted, 'there is a profound core of order within wild nature' (p. 275).

Wildness in the client–therapist dyad

> We are all wild. It's just that civilisation keeps getting in the way.
> (Barnes, 2007, p. 1)

One way of thinking about my approach is that I am supporting my clients, myself and the work we do together to be wild. If counselling and psychotherapy is about supporting unconscious process, being sensitive to and welcoming of the wild is a valid way to follow and track unfolding process. I am particularly interested in how the wild manifests in the therapeutic relationship.

Working with the wild, in client work, entails being comfortable with and exploring the unknown, to find our way *in* the forest rather than *through* it. An important aspect of my approach is to stay alert to my own and my client's experience as it manifests in many channels. Using the skills of tracking and following, much like an indigenous hunter may. Noticing and observing the smallest signals in my client, myself and the world around us. Aiming with a light attention to follow my client's breath, their gestures, facial expressions, the lilt or fall of their voice, and my corresponding responses. Paying attention, as well, to the noises in the street, the cat at the window and the fly buzzing in the room. Asking myself, what is carrying the song, the charge, the energy at any particular moment? Staying awake to the two sensing bodies in the room – what information can we hear, see, taste and feel? Where is the dance, that we are both weaving, now taking us?

I am aware, when working with many of my clients, of having unusual experiences. I can have vivid images, intense body sensations and what can seem irrational and at times overwhelming thoughts and impulses. Body psychotherapy has a sophisticated understanding of embodied somatic counter-transference (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014; Soth, 2005), which helps, to an extent, to make sense of such experiences, and make them of clinical value. Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar uses the term 'resonance' to describe a primarily non-verbal and affective response to what is happening in the other. 'Where the experiences of the other move and live through us and are sensed through *our own bodies*' (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014, p. 302; original emphasis). Our body amplifies the system of which the client and therapist are parts.

Trance and transference

I am at times deeply somatically and emotionally impacted by my clients. It's as if with each client I am drawn into an altered state of consciousness, or a trance state. Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar describes trance as

> a state of consciousness characterised by loosening of familiar habitual patterns of doing … A transitional internal and interpersonal organisation. Muscular relaxation, meditation, absorption in a book or film to the extent of ignoring external stimuli, daydreaming, the moments before falling asleep – all these are examples of common trance states. Trance can be both generative (useful, enriching, expanding) and degenerative (limiting, addictive and potentially abusive). (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014, p. 346)

Wikipedia states that trance is any state of consciousness other than the normal. Trance conditions include all the different states of mind, emotions, moods and daydreams that human beings experience. I was particularly interested in the statement that

> all activities which engage a human involve the filtering of information coming into sense modalities, and this influences brain functioning and consciousness. Therefore,

> trance may be understood as a way for the mind to change the way it filters information in order to provide more efficient use of the mind's resources. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trance)

This suggests that trance is both part of ordinary experience, and helpful, economical of our resources. Strikingly, this is also a possible description of transference. Transference and counter-transference can be seen as terms for how we filter the way we perceive the world and other people through our sense organs, and then how we go on to construct the information we receive. The difference to me is that transference filtering is a constant part of our body/mind structure, which we undertake habitually. We are all impacted and shaped by our unconscious expectations of the world, we are all unconsciously protecting ourselves and shaping our experiences, by filtering the information coming into our senses, which directly influences our body/brain functioning and consciousness. Character theory is one way of conceptualizing this body/mind structuring (Eiden, 2002; Kamalamani, 2012).

So in a sense, we are all in an altered state of consciousness, a trance state, all the time. It is just that we experience it as ordinary, it is habitual, it is how our body/mind is structured, so we are not able to recognize it. It is only when we come across other beings, animals, oak trees, humans, when 'others' can mirror and reflect something back to us, that we can then begin to notice some of our habitual ways of organizing ourselves. This is how psychotherapy works, paying attention to our habitual ways of organizing our experience, working with the transference and counter-transference material. When we are in a room with our clients, two altered states of reality, two trance states, come into contact with each other.

To work with trance states is to work deeply with relational material. The challenge is to both allow ourselves to enter the dance, be drawn into the trance, and remain outside it, witnessing the process. And this is in a sense impossible: to be in a trance and to be cognitively aware of it at the same time. Our greatest challenge as practitioners is to find a way to move between what can be intense emotional and somatic experiences (trance states) and states where we can reflect upon and think about our experiences.

I offer the idea of trance states as a creative concept to think about consciousness and the complexities of relational dynamics. I am aware that perhaps there is a danger in using this concept because of its conventional definition as a reduction of consciousness. But it also speaks to me of the reality of working with clients, that there are many times when we feel lost and when our thinking capacity can be severely limited. An inherent skill of most practitioners is being able to come back from unconscious states, to be able to find a bridge, to be able to articulate and think about what is happening. In supporting our clients to go into unconscious material, it is inevitable, I suggest, that at times we also go into unconscious processes. For me, what is missing from most counselling and psychotherapy modalities are theoretical constructs to support the therapist working from altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness.

The term 'trance', is also used in connection with shamanism and the use of altered states by indigenous cultures to work with health and our relationship with the other-than-human and more-than-human. This is a fascinating subject area, but beyond the scope of this article. Working with trance is how we directly participate

in the wildness of the system we are in with our clients. It directly challenges us to use all of our relational resources, our capacity to be intuitive and intellectual, to be embodied and en-minded; to enter other realms, other realities and to return.

Wild Mind

The altered state or trance state I'm trying to cultivate in my work with clients is that of being in Wild Mind. Wild Mind is a particular style of awareness that therapy can nurture and support (Totton, 2011, p. 77). I see my psychotherapy work in many ways as a practice, a way of being, similar to (though different from) a meditation practice. A central part of this practice is cultivating Wild Mind; being as aware of my movements, breath and the sounds outside as I am of my thoughts. Wild Mind is embodied, animal, spontaneous, co-creative and self-balancing, and has inherent wisdom (Totton, 2011, p. 77).

> Through Wild Mind we can access the unity of our being with the world, through many channels: as well as thinking and reasoning, we can listen to body sensations, dream, intuit, float, freely associate, learn from other-than-human and more-than-human beings, enter other realms of existence. This requires a deep trust both of our own embodiment and of the universe: willingness to surrender to this seemingly chaotic, messy, non-rational kind of knowing. (Totton & Priestman, 2012, p. 43)

Having access to the whole of our body–mind resources through Wild Mind can, at times, be invaluable. Hugh Brody has written in *The Other Side of Eden* (2001), when talking about Dunne-za hunter gatherers, that in the search for food they process huge amounts of data which is often both voluminous and elusive, through dreaming. 'Dreaming is the mind's way of combining and using more information than the conscious mind can hold. It allows memory and intuition and facts to intermingle' (Brody, 2001, p. 133). For most of human history we have been in a state of consciousness much closer to Wild Mind than our current, disembodied, intellectual focused state of consciousness.

Wild Mind is the part of ourselves that reconnects us with our animal inheritance. It can support us in a rebalancing, in a returning to valuing our sensual and sense-based relation to our world. I feel that we humans can learn a lot from animals; how to relax, how to trust our own spontaneity and instincts. 'Man would have good reason to be happy if he were as free from sadism, conversions and meanness, and is filled with the natural spontaneity as any of the animals, whether an ant or an elephant' (Reich, 1946/1975, p. 370).

Contrary to our projections on to animals of our own savagery, seeing them as dangerous, untamed and chaotic, animals usually display effortless poise and inner discipline. (Griffiths, 2006, p. 275)

Therapy by nature is wild

If we are human animals, if we are domesticated, wild beings, then it follows that the process of therapy is wild. Like wildness, therapy has its own laws, its own complex, rich, spontaneous unfolding. For millennia, for most indigenous people, law is in the land, nature provides meaning and direction. The truth that we are part of a larger, deep order was recognized and celebrated.

> This universal law, or Way, is Asha in Zoroastrian thoughts; Maat for ancient Egyptians, R'ta in Vedic India, Dharma for Hindus and Buddhists, and Tao in ancient China … The deep law of nature was Maligait for the Inuit, it was Wouncage, the old way, for the Oglala Lakota and the Dreaming for Aboriginal people. They are all expressions of a profound Law beneath everything, a Way of being. (Griffiths, 2006, p. 275)

For me, this means that therapy is a spiritual practice. That the process in our clients, which I am supporting and which holds and supports me, has its own wisdom and intelligence.

I would suggest that the process of therapy is not immediately comprehensible from our rational intellects. It is creative, dreamlike, seemingly chaotic; it is wild. Arnold Mindell (1985, 1992), the founder of Process Oriented Psychology, originally trained as a Jungian analyst, and was also deeply influenced by body psychotherapy, shamanic practices and Taoism. He uses the term 'dreambody' to describe how our process manifests in different channels, e.g. through our body symptoms, dreams, relationship issues and life challenges. Our process, or our dreambody, is continually winking at us, from our dreams, our slips of the tongue, the accidents that happen to us. This process is multi-channelled, non-linear, seemingly chaotic. It could be seen as a wisdom, or the Way, something that is continually directing us towards growth.

Is this inner wild, our process, the same as or linked to the outer wild, that organizes the earth and all its inhabitants? This wisdom, our process, dreambody, the Way, Tao, spirit, that which could be called God.

If therapy is wild, then thinking about the client and therapist as an ecosystem may be helpful. Ecosystems need no external agent to organize or regulate them. 'All open systems – be they cells or organisms, cedars or swamps – are seen to self organise' (Macy, 1991, p. 35). When working with clients, we do not need to know where the work is going, or to control it. Our task is often to get out of the way, to support and trust in whatever is unfolding.

Totton has noted that systems theory sees the world as complex self-organizing systems, that nothing causes anything else in a linear sense, but everything mutually responds to everything else.

> We struggle to conduct the conductor-less orchestra … Because there is actually no overarching Self to act as a conductor … Left to its own devices, however, the orchestra coordinates of its own accord just as ecosystems do, just as the universe does. (Totton, 2012, p. 261)

Conclusion

To work as an embodied, relational and wild therapist is to embrace our own wildness. To draw from our capacity to dream and intuit, alongside our capacity to rationalize and theorize. Can we allow ourselves to be deeply impacted by our clients, to surrender to the trance states that we are drawn into? To trust that our body/mind/spirit is responding to the totality of this present moment of interaction? To draw on our ability to listen to the wider intelligence that is inside us, but also the wider and wilder intelligence of which we are a part? Like Wild Mind, therapy that is wild is embodied, animal, spontaneous, co-created, self-balancing, and has inherent wisdom.

Have we, as David Abram has suggested, cast a spell over ourselves? The spell is to believe that our endemic separation, from our physicality and sensuous, breathing, intelligent bodies, is desirable and healthy. The spell is to believe that we human animals, because we can think abstractly, are above, wiser and more important than all the flora and fauna, than the mountains. Are we trapped in our own spell of disconnection of separateness? Are we destroying this beautiful earth around us because of our own trance?

Part of the spell we have cast upon ourselves is to believe that we are alone. That we are disconnected from ourselves, lone minds in disconnected bodies, lone individuals in disconnected societies, and a lone species disconnected in real tangible ways from the others on this earth. The reality is that we are not alone and never have been. We are held in a complex web of interconnectedness; family, friends, neighbours, work colleagues, we all touch others and, in turn, others touch us. We are held by the earth. We are held by the birds, singing joyously outside our windows, and the other-than-human and more-than-human. We are sustained by the breath that enters our bodies, and that enters and is shaped by all the other bodies and beings on this earth.

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Notes on contributor

Allison Priestman is an experienced Embodied-Relational Psychotherapist, Supervisor and Trainer, working in private practise in Stroud, Gloucestershire. She is a member of the Embodied-Relational Therapy training team and is an invited trainer to psychotherapy and counselling organizations in Britain. She is a full member of the European Association of Body Psychotherapy (EABP) and the Chiron Association for Body Psychotherapists (CABP). She is particularly interested in working relationally with the wild in the client–therapist dyad. She loves gardening, nature and dance. http://www.allisonpriestman.co.uk/

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