

ECOPSYCHOLOGY – THE “GREEN” APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH (PART 1)

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“You and I are not people who live in communion with the Earth, and yet we are people who evolved over the course of millions of years...to live in communion with it. We exist instead dislocated from our roots by the psychological, philosophical and technological constructions of our civilization, and this alienation leads to our suffering...As individuals, we express this suffering in our personal lives, in our relationships with ourselves and each other, through numbing and dysfunctional behaviors.”

Psychologist Chellis Glendinning, Ph.D.

“The cult of wilderness is not a luxury; it is a necessity for the preservation of mental health.”

Nobel prize winner Rene Dubos

In our practices, we now diligently inquire about multi-generational family history, substance abuse, sexual practices, HIV status, physical health etc. but perhaps even the most radical of systems practitioners may tend to omit the ultimate context for our own and our clients' lives: the biosphere. What is our clients' relationship to Mother Earth and Father Sky? And what, if anything, does that have to do with their presenting problem?

Rene Dubos teaches us that “We are shaped by the earth. The characteristics of the environment in which we develop condition our biological and mental being and the quality of our life.” Again, systems thinkers must agree. But how does this apply to mundane problems of living or to biochemical disorders of the brain or DSM-IV diagnoses?

“The current extinction crisis confronts humans with the question of whether or not they can continue to experience lives rich in meaning and value if this existence is built upon the

destruction of so much of the earth's living heritage," writes Stephen Kellert, professor in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University. Now we are in territory that every good therapist will recognize: denial and shame. "Kinship with living diversity confers a deep sense of connection to a larger and transcendent whole. These ... ties would seem to be imperiled by so much destruction inflicted upon the earth's living legacy. The moral shame that ensues could only corrode the human spirit."

We live in a historical era that is seeing the unprecedented destruction of the natural world. In other words, we are living through a Holocaust of the planet we inhabit. How is this affecting us, individually and collectively, and how can we and our clients construct meaningful lives at a time like this?

As with any massive trauma, our initial reaction may be denial. We act as if nothing were amiss. We doubt the seriousness of the situation. We hope the bad thing will just go away. We deny our collusion in the crimes against the planet. And we go on with our lives as usual for as long as we can, doing the best we can. But, hidden under the surface calm, a gnawing anxiety pervades our lives. Various physical and emotional symptoms may appear, but we are puzzled as to their message or meaning.

And perhaps when we begin to emerge from this denial we find ourselves in despair and hopelessness, feeling that there is nothing we can do. How can we affect the behavior of huge global corporations or millions of people all around the planet? Just living our everyday lives and surviving can take up all the energy we have. Our efforts can seem insignificant in the face of this mega-tragedy. Perhaps we just give a few dollars to an environmental organization and leave it at that.

Anger may emerge as well. We get sick of hearing about the problem. We change the channel when we stumble upon those annoying news stories and environmental documentaries about disappearing species, polluted food, unsafe beaches, shrinking farmland. We feel bombarded by the direct mail appeals from green organizations. It's all just too much to cope with.

What we perhaps don't see is how the global tragedy of our "Mother's" illness is affecting us personally, impacting our physical and mental health and that of our family and community.

How can we as therapists help ourselves and our clients at a time like this?

First, we must emotionally face what's happening all around us every day. We are in the middle of a huge global conflict between forces that are destroying the biosphere (sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously) and those that struggle to sustain it. At this stage of a transition, there are few purely neutral parties. Our actions are either helping or hurting the situation. To escape the insidious effects of gnawing guilt or shame, we may find it helpful to take action of some kind, even if it seems a pathetically small effort in the face of monumental and confusing global problems.

Environmentalists tell us that people who have a conscious, positive relationship of some kind with the natural world are more motivated to take action to protect it. They may also be healthier – physically and mentally – than those with no such connection.

According to 20 years of research by Yale's Dr. Kellert, being close to nature may be a built-in, biologically based emotional need (biophilia) for people. He believes that our quality of life is dependent upon the richness of our connections with nature. Not only does the natural world provide us with material necessities – food, clothing, medicine, clean air, pure water – it just as importantly plays a key role in other aspects of our lives, including intellectual capacity, emotional bonding, aesthetics, creativity, family and community stability, spiritual and psychological health, imagination and even a sense of purpose.

We ignore this need at our peril. How can we go on kidding ourselves that the health and happiness of our individual body-mind-soul is somehow magically separate from the health of the biological continuum in which we are embedded and from which we eat and drink each day?

SOME RESOURCES

Glendinning, Chellis. "My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization."

Kellert, Stephen R. and Edward O. Wilson, eds., "The Biophilia Hypothesis."

www.ecopsychology.org The International Community for Ecopsychology

<http://thoughtoffering.blogs.com/ecotherapy> The International Association for Ecotherapy

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“Human identity and fulfillment depend on the effective expression of our ...relationship with the living world. Humans require intimate affiliation with nature, not just to ensure their material and physical well-being but also to satisfy essential emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs. The degradation of this dependence increases the likelihood of a diminished existence, materially, affectively, cognitively and evaluatively. The human species can no more disassociate itself from the natural world than it can from the products of its cultural creation. Biological diversity and ecological process persist as crucibles on which human physical and mental fitness rely...Nature’s healthy functioning conditions the human capacity to lead lives of emotional, intellectual and spiritual value.” Stephen R. Kellert.

The fairly new fields of ecopsychology and ecotherapy can help us to help ourselves and our clients out of the cycle of hidden depression, anxiety and shame that no amount of Prozac can erase. Those working in this area offer suggestions for meaningful ways of improving lives.

Connecting with nature in one’s daily life seems a simplistic prescription, but it is a powerful one. We can begin to ask our clients not only about their relationships with people but also about their relationship with the earth. What was the most emotionally and spiritually

powerful experience they had with nature as a child? As an adult? What feelings were aroused? How did these experiences make them feel about themselves? Did these experiences cause change in their lives? Who in their family or their ancestry was especially attuned to nature? How much time each day, each week, do they and their family spend outdoors vs. indoors? Do they know what phase the moon is in today? Do they have a garden or raise plants at home? Do they have relationships with animals? When was the last time they felt a powerful connection to nature? Are they helping children to connect to nature? What nature rituals, if any, do they practice? Do they celebrate the solstices? How simple or complex are their lives? How comfortable are they with their physical environment? And, if they aren't comfortable, what if any changes are they making? It can be surprising how deeply these few questions may touch a client's soul and unlock a Pandora's box of lifestyle issues needing to be dealt with.

I also like to ask about my clients' relationship with the food they ingest. Do they know where it comes from? Do they feel confident that it nourishes them, body and soul, or do they have anxieties about what may lurk there? Do they know the people who raise their food?

My own relationship with the biosphere has changed radically over the last 16 years since my husband and I moved away from the megalopolis and into a human-sized town where we have begun to grow more of our own food in our backyard garden. This simple, age-old practice has expanded our consciousness in ways we couldn't have imagined when we set out. We began to understand, know and love every square inch of our land the way a lover knows every inch of their long-time beloved's body. In the southwest corner of the back garden, there is enough sun in winter for broccoli or peas. At the bottom of the hill there is clay soil that gets boggy in winter, smothering the seedlings (compost alert!). In the lower bed the Asian pear has become a perfect trellis to grow the chayote squash on. The patio garden catches the light of the full moon as the angel's trumpet releases its seductive perfume. Gaia's charms are specific, immanent.

We began to pay attention to seeds and seedlings as if they were children. Which had been fumigated before we got them? Which were grown in organic soil? We read the fine print

on the pesticide bottles in the local garden centers and began to realize how much of what we'd eaten in the last fifty years was grown using just such chemicals. We joined an organic farming organization and began to chat with organic farmers at the local Farmer's Market about fascinating topics like non-toxic treatments for peach curl or the best low-chill apple trees for coastal Southern California. We started to pay attention to weather and phases of the moon and animal tracks and the fact that hummingbirds and pollinating bees were growing scarcer in our area. Our senses were enlivened by this intimate connection. Our eyes were opened to local problems we hadn't noticed before. For example, the sign at the rose garden across from the Santa Barbara Mission warning about pesticide spraying every Monday (while children and dogs played nearby) took on ominous new meaning. We were relieved when the spraying was stopped.

As for most people, this is an evolutionary process for us. One thing leads to another. One awareness opens our eyes, minds, and hearts for the next. We are still beginners, but we can never again be unconscious of our responsibility and our effect on the situation, positive or negative. Many others – perhaps many of you — have been working on saving the earth for years and perhaps even integrating ecopsychology principles and techniques into their practices. We eagerly listen to them to learn their secrets, just as we listen to the 74-year-old organic dried tomato matriarch at our Farmer's Market who has introduced us to a revolution in sensual enjoyment.

The changes I have seen in my own mental health are startling. I feel more awake to the world. I feel stronger, more confident. My mood is up, my anxiety down. A vague sense of malaise has lifted. My senses are more open. I notice the exact reddish-brown color of a budding rose leaf, the curve of a blue scrub jay's wing, the enticingly earthy smell of perfectly "cooked" compost we have made from our yard clippings and table scraps. I have more joy in my life, even in the face of the huge ecological losses we all face. I am relieved to be off the fence about my responsibilities at this historical moment in time. A recent dream encouraged me to "rejoin the revolution" of my hippie/feminist youth, and I'm enjoying the renewal of excitement and energy

that comes from getting involved again with the messy business of trying to change the world a tiny step at a time.

A few years ago my husband and I got together with some eco-minded friends to form a local “Simplicity Circle” where we help each other wrestle with both the macro and micro systems which sometimes seem to conspire to keep our lives complex and disconnected from nature. We read books, share tips and ideas and work to create more sustainable, earth-friendly lives.

We’re also joining with neighbors to save local open space, to clean up our town’s urban creeks and polluted beaches, to design permaculture gardens. And yes, we need to give money to the bigger global efforts too.

Focusing on nature helps me put my own personal challenges in proper perspective. I gain great peace and nurturing from the quiet time I schedule to be with Mother Nature each week – sometimes alone, or with my husband and with friends, relatives, children, fellow members of the tribe. I find that relating to people in the context of nature heals and expands relationships in ways I wouldn’t have predicted. And moving around outside creates a wonderful balance for my sedentary psychotherapy work.

Do I preach to clients? I do my best not to, of course. But in sessions I find myself exploring new areas. I wonder if clients have a favorite place to walk to heal their spirit when hurting or troubled ... or an outdoor movement practice (and how might that feel different from an indoor practice?). I ask what people notice about the land and water around them. I inquire after the health of mountains and streams near their houses. I wonder what pre-human nature was like in the area where they live and ask them to project what the region will look like in their children’s old age. I want to know what feelings people have about the physical environment where they spend most of their time. I ask about the pace and rhythms of their lives. I wonder about what their ideal life would include.

These, to me, are now crucial diagnostic questions, relating directly to the health of individual, family, community and planetary body-mind-soul.

Resources

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