

Nature in Psychotherapy Practice
by
Tara Gilmaher
DPT 2nd year, Track H

Eco-Spirituality & Eco-Therapy
DPT 732
Betsy Perluss, Ph. D.
5/20/18

Nature in Psychotherapy Practice

I grew up in the midst of nature; animals and nature were an essential element of my survival through a childhood of complex trauma, from two families with multi-generational trauma. I never understood the divide between the natural, imaginal, and human worlds. As a child, I was forever attempting to bring animals and nature into my daily life. I did not grow up with nature as a purely idyllic eden: at age 5, I was trapped by wildfires alone at home with our animals; one winter I was caught in the wash and nearly washed away by a flash flood; later that winter, to save our house, we opened the doors and let the mud and flood waters rage through our home. My mother continually scolded me for trying to bring my Shetland pony into my bedroom to have tea with my bear, and had to retrieve me from the pastures, horse stalls, and tack room where I disappeared for hours with our dogs, cats, rabbits, lizards, and horses. I assumed that if the wash was a good place for people to swim in the summer, that that must be true for our horses too, and rode my Shetland right in for a swim together on a hot day (swimming with our horses is one of my most cherished memories). My father's American Indian heritage offered some shelter for my life lived between worlds, constantly insisting that animals and natural objects great and small be treated as the people I perceived them to be; a trait I learned to hide for much of my life, which guided me toward depth, imaginal, archetypal, and spiritual psychology. Professionally, I work with people who have developmental, complex, relational, historical, and post-traumatic traumas, as well as somatic, grief, identity, family systems, LGBTQ, and existential issues. The idea of trying to engage in healing work in a completely artificial environment seems like an absurd oxymoron to me. In his recent lectures at the *Trauma*

and Transcendence Conference (June 23-24, 2018) at Pacifica Graduate Institute, author and Jungian analyst Dr. Donald Kalsched spoke on the non-ordinary or anomalous experiences that seem common among trauma survivors. Kalsched described an interpenetration of what he refers to as Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung's first world of physical and phenomenal experience with Jung's identified second mythopoetic or archetypal world. (Kalsched described these worlds as aligning with Jung's description of Jung's identification of his own number one and number 2 personalities.) Kalsched suggested that the separation between the ordinary physical world and mythopoetic worlds may be thinner, or more porous for those who have childhood experiences of trauma. Kalsched described the separation between these worlds as "the veil." In my reading of Dr. Betsy Perluss' (2006) *Touching Earth, Finding Spirit: A Passage into the Symbolic Landscape*, I felt Perluss' recognition of the simultaneous dual existences of natural environments and landscapes were the same two worlds as described by Jung and Kalsched. Perluss seems to be describing the same interpenetration of the two worlds in bringing this perspective to understanding something like mountain's significance in psyche.

"From the beginning of history, people from around the world have revered mountains as cosmic centers, or the Center of the World. While the base of the mountain outlines the circumference of sacred space, the axis acts as a medium between the...regions of existence. This demonstrates that the bright white peaks are inseparable from the shadowy ground below; sky is inseparable from earth, spirit is inseparable from matter, consciousness is inseparable from unconscious" (Perluss, 2006, p. 202).

Perluss continued, connecting natural forms to the two worlds in archetypal language,

“archetypal...motifs can be traced to the shapes and patterns found in the natural landscape. Thus, in addition to being a mass of rock, the archetypal mountain is also the cosmic mountain, linking heaven and earth and fastening the four cardinal directions” (Perluss, 2006, p. 202-203).

The natural world and our environment is an often-overlooked element of human health and well-being. I believe many traditional wisdom traditions have emphasized that humans cannot be healthy and whole if they lose right relationship with their natural world. Many pan-theistic and animistic cultures have systems of offerings and prohibitions intended to maintain balance in the human-natural world relationship.

Western European traditions’ and, according to Lionel Corbett in his December 2017 lecture *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism and its Relationship to Terrorism* (Psyche and the Sacred, Encino, California), the Abrahamic-based religions’ relationship with nature has evolved based on a fundamental belief that nature is something to be tamed, controlled by man, to be used and consumed as mankind’s birthright from God. Many would say that the Western view of nature allowed civilization and technology to accelerate beyond most other cultures; some would add that the shadow of this acceleration is disconnection and destruction of our natural ecology and the natural world of the psyche. Toward the end of the 20th century, we began to recognize the pandemic of disconnection, depression, anxiety, addiction, narcissism, and unprecedented scales of human conflict in the 20th century as signs of disconnection, including the increased disconnection of humans from nature. In his Terry Lectures, published in 1938 in

English and 1940 in German, Jung (in Sabini, 2016) discussed the effect of Western Judeo-Christian ideas in disrupting relationship with nature. Jung suggested

“modern science...despiritualize(d) nature through its so-called objective knowledge of matter....firstly man’s mystical identity with nature was curtailed as never before, and secondly the projections falling back into the human soul caused such a terrific activation of the unconscious that in modern times man was compelled to postulate the existence of an unconscious psyche (Jung, *Collected Works* 11, par. 375 in Sabini, p. 86). Jung elaborated, “the earth is the depreciated and misunderstood part....Our morality is based on the negation of the flesh...man has repeatedly experienced the fact that the life that is not lived here, or the life lived provisionally, is utterly unsatisfactory (Jung, *Interpretations of Visions*, in Sabini, 2016, pp. 86, 192-193).

Jung seems to be suggesting one of the ills of civilization stems from human destruction of ecosystems and creation of artificial landscapes; humanity is only beginning to discover the cost of the loss of connection to the natural environment and its nourishment of soul as well as body.

More than 40 years after Jung’s Terry Lectures, in Japan science began to investigate the effects of the natural world on health and wellbeing. An article in the *New Yorker* by José Ginarte (January 25, 2018) on the Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, literally translated as “forest bathing,” *A Japanese Photographer Captures the Mysterious Power of Forest Bathing*, discussed the Forest Agency of Japan’s campaign to re-introduce *shinrin-yoku*, part of traditional spiritual practices in Japan in 1982. Since its introduction into modern life, studies have shown that this practice of immersion in a

forest environment's sights, sounds, and smells provides numerous psychological and physiological benefits, including lowering blood pressure and anxiety, reducing anger, and strengthening the immune system. The studies on the effects of shinrin-yoku supports Jung's intuition that our cultural and individual mental health and relational issues may stem from a pervasive disconnection from nature, and thus from entire aspects of what Jung identified as the archetypal, objective or transpersonal Self, disconnection that has increased globally in the half-century since Jung's death. Many in the field of ecological studies and ecosophy might suggest that psychology as a field must address how to go about bringing nature and the natural world into mental health and what that might mean in environments in which humans have consumed or eradicated all signs of nature, such as immigration camps, inner cities, shanty-town slums or in artificially sterile environments devoid of nature, often created for the ultra-rich, as seen in places like Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates.

Awareness of the problem created by disconnection from nature and humanity's need to reconnect indicates an almost imaginable body of questions of what it may mean to bring nature into modern life and into psychotherapy as a practice toward wholeness, repair, and consciousness. The burgeoning field of *ecotherapy*, defined by Patricia Hasbach (2012) in *Ecopsychology: Science, Totems and the Technological Species* as "a form of therapy that enlarges the traditional scope of treatment to include the human-nature relationship. At its most fundamental level, ecotherapy encompasses all that good traditional psychotherapy entails...(E)cotherapy draws on a theory of human-nature relationship....this theory...(of) ecopsychology" (Hasbach, 2012, p. 116-117).

Hasbach clarified that ecotherapy must occur within the traditional frame of therapy with a therapist and client, and that it must also include nature (p.118). Hasbach identified three general ways in which nature is brought into the therapeutic work in ecotherapy: by listening for and talking about nature, beauty, and encounters in nature with clients; holding sessions in natural settings; and nature experiences clients are asked to engage in between sessions to work with during sessions (p.119).

While I do not identify as an ecotherapist, I have an internal conception that the presence of some element of nature is essential to healing in therapeutic work, just as essential as the elements of light, image, affect, and relationship. I attempt to provide as much nature as possible in my work, as a stabilizing and grounding element for the deep work I do with trauma. It has been shocking to encounter therapy rooms without windows, plants, or natural surfaces in some of the community mental health agencies I have encountered. Referring to Hasbach's (2012) description of ecotherapy I recall my first imaginings of my ideal practice space and its evolution. I imagined developing my practice over time into one that has outdoor space, native plants, water in some form, space to move, a view of nature, and the presence of animals set in an area where people come to walk and that has a sense of community. For some clients, I find it has been extremely helpful to do our session work walking in nature, allowing the physical space to disperse energy and provide safe containment. I have long imagined developing some trail-riding work with clients on horseback, allowing the regular age-old movement and relationship of riding a horse in nature to add physical, emotional, and spiritual support for clients' integration and wholeness. I hope to offer group work with clients in natural settings in several ways. I am interested in offering group relational work for individuals

and family systems in nature settings, away from technology, to help explore how to be and relate as human mammals. So much of modern city and urban dwellers' connection to self and the humanity that came before us has been interrupted over the generations as result of the cultural shift in which adult caregivers work away from the home starting in children's early infancy; I imagine group work using art, meditation, and ritual with therapeutic containment at ancient sites to help clients re-connect with a sense of tradition, identity, archetype, finding a sense of regulated self in community, and developing earned attachment strategies that allow people to interact in more meaningful ways.

Andrew Solomon's (2008) described an African *ndeup*, a traditional village exorcism for depression, and his conversations with locals while on a journalism assignment in Africa in his story, "Notes on an Exorcism" in *Guts: Stories From the Razor's Edge* (2011) presented in the audio storytelling series, *The Moth Presents: Guts: Stories From the Razor's Edge*. I felt a recognition of traditional principles in Solomon's story that seemed to address Jung's identification of the problem in human disconnection from nature that I had assumed was universally known. Solomon reported that the locals sent UN workers away because they felt the UN workers did not understand healing after trauma; Solomon was told the UN workers kept asking people to go into an enclosed bare white room and talk, and the locals felt it made people worse. One man told Solomon that it was absurd to think people would heal by talking to one person in a tiny enclosed room, and wondered that the UN workers did not know what 'everyone' (the local people of the villages in the area) knew as a universal commonsense principle: to heal, people need to be in the sun, near trees; that people need to be with and sung to by their village;

and that healing requires attention and sacrifice from the sufferer, the healer, and the community. These age-old ideas of what is needed to produce healing in people is common among many traditional cultures around the world, that people need to come together, to see one another, to share song or story, break bread, and often make some sacrifice in order to heal. This basic universal idea is present in rituals and spiritual traditions from small, isolated indigenous peoples all the way to the world's major religions. One of the significant differences is that in traditional, indigenous, and historical traditions, people were connected to their environment as an inescapable reality of daily life. Perhaps one of the ills of civilization and our creation of artificial landscapes is the loss of connection to the natural environment and its nourishment of soul as well as body.

Deep ecologist and writer Gary Snyder of San Juan Ridge in the California Sierras (1990) explored the role, lessons, and definitions of nature, wild, and wilderness (pp. 5-11) in his essay "The Etiquette of Freedom" (Freedom) from his book *The Practice of the Wild*. Snyder said of wildness, "Wildness is not just the 'preservation of the world,' it *is* the world." Snyder called for "a civilization that can live fully and creatively together with wildness" (p. 6, italics in original). Snyder entreats,

"It has always been part of basic human experience to live in a culture of wilderness...Nature is not a place to visit, it is *home*" (p. 7, italics in original).

"The world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us. There are more things in mind, in the imagination, than "you" can keep track of....The depths of mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas....The body is, so the speak, in the mind. They are both wild" (p. 16) "Most of humanity...have understood the play

of the real world with all its suffering....is allowing the sacred to enter and accepting the sacramental aspect of our shaky temporary personal being....The information passed through the system is intelligence” (Snyder, 1990, p. 19).

Snyder’s observations present a pragmatic integration of Jung’s observation of humanity’s need to live connected to earth and the natural world, and that without valuing earth and nature that humans become neurotic.

It is a challenge to bring nature into psychotherapy. The socioeconomics of access, transportation, and the natural splitting of focus and energy to manage all the aspects of a modern customer-service oriented business (of providing therapy) all make the inclusion of nature, wildness, and wilderness a deliberate choice requiring personal and professional dedication in the therapist and openness, trust, and commitment in clients. Like so much of value in life, the energy and cost to include nature and ecopsychology in therapeutic work should not dissuade its inclusion. As a lifelong environmentalist, including nature in my work is part of my ethos, the values, ethics, and integrity of work worth doing. Along with so many, I believe that humans cannot be whole and healthy without a whole and healthy environment and ecology as an inseparable, integral reflection of our inner state as a natural manifestation of Psyche. My personal and professional hope is that healing within will allow us to answer the call to consciousness and engage the healing called for in the world around us. Even though I do not identify as an ecotherapist, I believe ecotherapy is an intrinsic element in any wholistic engagement with Psyche, Archetype, the Self, Relationship, Myth, and the nature of What-Is. I sense nature as a representative reflection of the ego-Self axis manifest in the world; nature cannot be extricated from the individual and collective

processes of individuation and collective wholeness. The work of embracing consciousness can be overwhelming and dysregulating; using nature, wilderness, or wildness to ground and develop tolerance for here-and-now and what-is in relationship work may be one of the few ways for deep trauma to transform into compassion, empathy, and resilience to engage.

References

- Corbett, L. (December 1, 2017). The psychology of religious fundamentalism and its relationship to terrorism. (Unpublished Lecture). *Psyche and The Sacred: A Contemplative Community (PSCC) 2017 Friday Night Lecture Series*. Encino, CA.
- Ginarte, J. (January 25, 2018). A Japanese photographer captures the mysterious power of forest bathing. [online website for weekly periodical]. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from: www.NewYorker.com
- Hasbach, P. (2012). Ecotherapy. In *Ecopsychology: Science, totems and the technological species*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 115.
- Holifield, B. (2015). Psyche within the matrix of the natural world: Emergence, restoration, and sustainability. *Psychological Perspectives*, 58(2), 231-243.
- Kalsched, D. (June 23, 2018). Glimpses through the veil: Encounters of the numen in clinical work. (Unpublished Lecture). In *Trauma and Transcendence* [Conference]. Carpinteria, CA: Pacifica Graduate Institute.
- Kalsched, D. & Cambray, J. (June 24, 2018). Trauma and synchronistic phenomena in the analytic setting. (Unpublished Panel Discussion). In *Trauma and Transcendence* [Conference]. Carpinteria, CA: Pacifica Graduate Institute.
- Perluss, B. (2006). Touching earth, finding spirit: A passage into the symbolic landscape. *Spring Journal* 76(2), 201-222.
- Sabini, M. (Ed.). (2016). *The earth has a soul: C. G. Jung on nature, technology, and modern life*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, p. 86,

Snyder, G. (1990). The etiquette of freedom. In *The practice of the wild*. San Francisco, CA: North Point Press.

Solomon, A. (2008, October 29). Notes on an exorcism. In J. Firestone (Executive director). (Nov. 3, 2011). *The moth presents: Guts: Stories from the razor's edge* [Video file]. New York, NY: Public Radio Exchange, The Players Club.
Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UBgBpFGODI>