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Psyche within the Matrix of the Natural World: Emergence, Restoration, and Sustainability

Barbara Holifield

This article elucidates a Jungian approach to ecopsychology. The author shows how her own experience of wilderness informs her analytic work with a woman healing from profound developmental trauma. Alongside the holding environment derived from the healing connection, tumult, and repair in the analytic relationship, the emergence of the analysand's relationship to the natural world became central to a reorganization of her inner world. This reorienting of self in relation to the land is likened to the Navajo Beautyway ceremony. By digging in dirt, growing things, experiencing the cycles of the seasons and the life–death–life cycle, the analysand forges a path from dissociation to embodiment of self and a sense of self in the world. The author discusses Jung's view of how a direct experience of the natural world is synonymous with an experience of Self. Connections are drawn to Winnicott's formulation of the process in which psyche indwells soma in individual healing and as a way of understanding Western culture's relation to our bigger body, the earth.

SUSTAINABILITY

This morning I walk down a quiet valley to where its stream lets out into a small bay. Here the Pacific pounds and shapes the steep red rocky walls of the ocean's headlands. I come upon a great blue heron that is standing in the stream. I see there is a furry little creature hanging from its beak. Thinking the heron a fish eater, I step closer, mesmerized as the heron plunges its prey into the water and plucks it out repeatedly.



James Griffith, *La Brea – Attraction Moth*, tar on panel, 5 × 7 in., 2014.

Washing it? Careful and very curious, I move closer. The heron sees me, hinges its long leg and steps back. A few minutes pass when, from behind me, a falcon swoops at lightning speed, brushing within inches of my shoulder. I hear the air vibrate, a rush of wild sensation flushes through me. The falcon dives screeching at the heron. The heron lets out a distress call and swiftly plucks its prey from the stream. The dripping body of the small mammal dangles from its long bill. I see the falcon land on a rocky low ledge and then dive again, screeching. The great heron calls out and takes its prey, which is about the length of my forearm, into its beak and swallows it whole. I watch the bulge of it slowly move down the long slender curve of the heron's neck.

The falcon takes flight.

With a slight bow I too take leave. Aware of an inner pulsing, a wordless reflection, realizing I had unexpectedly become part of a hunt. Potential threat, silent witness. Soon I will be at my office with a week ahead of analytic practice.

Oil hemorrhages from the Deepwater Horizon each day as I write. The environmental crisis intensifies. I feel an insistent urging to seriously consider what, if any, contribution analytic psychologists can make toward an ethic that values and preserves this living world *within the context* of the work we do. The ways we can contribute may be small, but to not do so, for me, would be to dissociate from this living world and enter a state of psychic numbness.

The naturalist Barry Lopez (1978) suggests that we are autistic in relation to the natural world—*autistic* in the sense that our deepest experiences are never voiced and thus remain encapsulated and undeveloped. Yet for a voice to emerge, there must be one who listens. For “if there is no one to listen, the parts of us that are only born of such listening never enter this world, not even in a dream” (Michaels, 2009, p. 318).

What might emerge if we adjusted our listening perspective to carefully hear what our patients experience in their relationship to nature? Would we want to? If we listen and facilitate a deeper exploration, do we believe it will draw us away from the necessary work of intra- and interpersonal material? Do we hear patients' feelings about the earth as resistance or displacement? Could these feelings instead be a root of psychic suffering? If truly heard, might prophetic visions arise about what is deeply desired (Watkins, 2009)—desires to restore what is wounded and live in dignity with each other and the land?

We listen to patients' sense of animals and plants and stones and rivers and forests as they arise in dream. Do we privilege dream over the *direct experience in the living world*?

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Parallel to Winnicott's (1960) notion that "there is no baby without the mother" is the reality that there is no person without the earth. An intersubjective perspective contributes to understanding that if, in that primal dyad, the mother is perceived as a background mother, as a facilitating container rather than a person with her own subjectivity, relational

dynamics become prone toward those involving domination and submission. Looking at our culture's reign of domination over the earth from this perspective, it seems there could be a wisdom in recognizing the earth and the earth's interspecies community as nonhuman *others* whom we can both care for and hurt. Truly feeling and giving voice to the affective significance and meaning of our bond with the earth may be a crucial basis for action to restore the earth and a sustainable life worth living.

CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR BOND WITH EARTH

With this premise in mind, I will present a small segment of work with a woman whom I call Renée.

Renée is fifty-three and has been working with me for nine years in analysis, two to three times a week. At one very painful moment in our work she told me—the telling near desperate, as if throwing me a line with which I could pull her into this life—that she was autistic in some ways. It was a few years into the analysis before she could speak of her relationship with her mother. After many years she described her own wound to be like that of a newborn animal, the one amidst the litter whom the mother shuns, attacks, and refuses to nurture. Renée added that if someone did not intervene, the shunned one would die. Much of her analysis explored the intimate edge of life and death, of living and deadness. In the early years of her analysis she walked ghost-like, dissociated and shut down through her urban environment. She then moved to a small farm just outside of the city. She restored it from scratch. It was one of the best things she has ever done for herself. Digging in the earth, having a patch of land that was hers has been enormously significant in her finding a path out of dissociation. She *listened and*

responded to an inner voice that had been all but beaten down by competing and attacking points of view. She heard some call from within. It opened doorways to a wellspring of energy that lay covered and dormant.

However, after the initial surge of creative energy there were long periods of descent when all that unfolded between us in her analysis was projected and played out in relationship to the land. She felt cut off from it, she abandoned it and lost any sense of meaning. She has felt her land didn't matter, nor did she. She has experienced nature as attacking. Three years ago the inner persecutory voices became so strong that she was hospitalized. From that state of deintegration, in which we worked with the primitive agonies of early abandonment, she emerged with an inner foundation that had more solidity and from which she could grow. The next section of our work focused on a span of time following that period.

This session occurred the same day I encountered heron, falcon, and mole.

Renée begins her session with this: "Isn't God something people create to fill an absence? If a person is really frightened, dying, they cling to something. They cry out for God."

I feel as if falcon and heron are flying in my abdomen, hovering in my consciousness. I have no words . . . I sense that there is a serendipitous quality to these things occurring so closely together. I partially want to shake my head affirmatively and partially don't. I say, "The feeling of clinging when scared kinda resonates, doesn't it?" Somewhat thoughtfully, yet somewhat defensively at once, she says, "It's universal, isn't it?"

She jumps in saying that while I was away on vacation, she found herself thinking and reading about God. She describes how her sense of God has dissolved, the God that is the Supreme Being whom you join in the afterlife; God, the one who has lived in her cells since her Catholic education. She reviews how the religion itself fell away for her a while ago, as she grew closer to the earth. But this notion of God . . . it has lived in her . . . but it is dissolving.

With heron, falcon, and mole I have been taken down into a primal realm where life and death feel very imminent. The encounter situates me in a community of living beings . . . a community of diversity and wildness of which I can lose track in my very peopled world. I am glad to be brought down to size, so to speak, before entering the analytic hour with Renée as she wonders about God. It is keeping me settled so as to not get drawn into words and ideological constructs that could take her away from her experience. I listen and wonder what she is feeling. I wonder, why is she going here now? I don't have a sense of what is moving her or what she is feeling. I have a flash of what she has been through in her analysis. I elaborate here what actually went by in a flash for me.

I wonder about the sense of beauty, awe, and profound interconnect-
edness that has become such a meaningful part of her experience in the
natural world. *I wonder, is she dismissing/attacking this essential part of
herself?* I am thinking of the moment when she held in the palm of her hand
a small bird that had fallen from its nest. It was dying. Their eyes met. For the
first time in her life she could accept death instead of feeling it as a shameful
thing that wasn't supposed to happen. Also alive in my memory is an experi-
ence she had three years ago when she found the courage to travel alone to
the mountains. It was a big event because for years prior, she had struggled
to find an inner sense of safety by staying home and clinging tight to me or
clinging to her small farm. Because the *clinging* was constricting, at times
even deadening, it backfired, frustrating her need for satisfying engagement
with her land or with me.

While in the high mountains she hiked to a beautiful lake surrounded
by peaks still capped in winter's snow. Surprising herself, she followed an
inner impulse and jumped in the lake. In that stunning moment the bril-
liant cold and the clear light filled her. She saw the interconnectedness of
the ecosystem of snow, lake, mountain, and forest and experienced her-
self as utterly part of it. She mattered and so did the earth. Upon her re-
turn, at first tentative but then seeing my interest, she told me of her jour-
ney. Her telling rang with a new creative aliveness in her that we both
recognized. I began feeling the beauty and interconnection with the natu-
ral world *and* between us as she spoke. Numinosity infused the long mo-
ment, a *coniunctio*. She felt this; it was what she so hungered for. It was
a pivotal moment in her analysis—like sharing and deepening around a big
dream.

Yet by the shifting in her expression, her breathing, and the panicky
motion that came over her body, I could sense that she quickly became fright-
ened. Fear of potential loss, memories of past loss, and conflict about what
was enough and not enough between us cascaded through her.

She was shaken. Painfully I witnessed her retreat. She then dreamed
of a gated reserve. Within this reserve was an inner walled place where she,
along with many endangered species of mammals, withdrew behind a great
protective door.

Her withdrawal coincided with the sun's withdrawal and winter's com-
ing, a season that historically was marked by profound depression for Renée.
Anticipating this, she felt a familiar dread of the grey cold unwelcoming,
matching the colorless place inside her of isolation and detachment. She had
grown up in a city in which fog was the dominant element, and shutting down
in the face of the denial of her being by those nearest her was the drone. Here
her inner and outer worlds merged.

But now, after these pivotal experiences in her analysis, something had been tasted and taken in that could not be forgotten, which kept rising up and reaching out from within her. This inner reaching manifested in tumultuous reaching out to connect with me, retreating, and then slowly building trust from the work of repair. Dreams nudged at the familiar defense of the Self, and yet she pushed back. Winter was so dreary, she despaired; she entered a state of traumatic psychophysiological freeze and lost her capacity to self-reflect. This frozen place was the portal. By exploring the physical sensations of this inner state, she met the edge of inner and outer. I wondered with her: What was the most uncomfortable sensation she felt when touched by the cold fog? What, if anything, did she find of interest in it? She struggled to be with her direct experience. She had been so accustomed to simply shutting out the world, others, and herself. In this dark state she began to make contact with the pervasive gray where the outer and inner merged. She noticed how her gut gripped as she stepped into the fog, how she tried to *not* feel it and then would become more agitated. In tandem with this process she also spoke of how hard it was to make eye contact with me. As with the fog, she avoided contact and thus could not sense my intent, which kept her isolated and distrustful. These aversions were spoken and felt.

Because Renée has difficulty focusing, she has not been prone to reading. Yet unexpectedly during this time she was moved to read about and understand winter, especially late winter. She needed to know why, after the winter solstice, when the rotation of earth had shifted and the light returned, the air continued to be cold. She learned this was due to the passing of air ocean waters that cool rather dramatically with the loss of the sun during winter months. She learned how the trade winds and ocean currents kept the air cool as it rode those waters till enough time of warmth passed to warm the waters.

In this way she pulled herself up out of a merged reactive fog with her thinking function in concert with the courage to stay present to her direct experience and thus be touched by the life–death–life cycle of winter. She walked in the wet air and even dared a moment in which she let in the brilliant clarity of stars on one dark,

cold night. She made contact with the living world and with me . . . this taste

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of connection and being truly touched by beauty and by an other pulled her along through the most terrifying and urgent places of retreat.

Jung talks about the experience of being touched by the soul of an animal or the soul of the earth as being united with the deepest part of the collective unconscious. In reference to a female patient, in the Vision Seminars, (1930–1934/1997) he says:

Now there is a chance things may come right, because the original pattern is unveiled, the original law is reestablished. Things take the course they must necessarily take because there is no longer any possibility of a loss of connection. The break between man and nature has been abolished, there is a bridge once more. So the possibility of creating dissociated systems [like Renée's formulation of God] in which she might go astray is abolished on principle. Of course it is still possible to a certain extent, but the possibility of *inner guidance* is always there, and she will be less liable to wander off into arbitrary ideas or systems. (p. 161)

Here Jung links finding *inner guidance* with the guidance that comes with having connected to the earth.

As I sit with Renée, as she wonders about God, I wonder if any of these experiences about her time at the lake, beholding death and the small bird abide in her as she wonders about God. These are my reveries; I don't want to foreclose on what is trying to unfold in her, so I cautiously ask, "When you think in this way about God, what's your feeling?"

"I feel a sense of humanness. I still feel connected with all living things, but I just feel a sense of humanness. In that other belief I was made to feel small, worthless. God was almighty. I was but ashes," she responds.

Perhaps I am getting some sense of where she might be going with this. In her family, Renée was the one denied subjectivity, repeatedly abandoned by the ones she most needed. Engulfed by affects that were unbearable because of that abandonment—what Winnicott (1960) has described as indwelling in the soma—the ability to be with affect sensed in her body was disrupted. A split developed between body and mind. Overtime Renée just shut down, retreated from domination and protected her spirit behind a thick, impenetrable wall. When she did feel, she felt she didn't matter. Nothing mattered. She submitted. As her cognitive and verbal capacities developed, she used intellectual concepts and others' dictates as the basis from which to verify her reality, such as her belief in God.

Over the course of our work there have been long stretches of time when, at the anticipation of the end of an hour or when I am on vacation,

she has been certain that I felt she did not matter to me. Once the door of my office was shut—that was it. She was but ash. Now she can usually speak about the experience of traumatic activation that accompanies a sense of abandonment without its being enacted, and the feelings of hate, confusion, disorientation, and a desperate clinging behavior (elements of a disorganized attachment pattern) do not dominate the interplay between us.

MATTERING

However, after my recent extended absence, her trust in me as one who could be there for her got challenged. Around this time her belief in God as an all-powerful knowing presence dissolved. Intense affects of terror and powerlessness became the fire for transformation in which her idealization of me was turned to ash. I got taken down to human size, and *she* could believe in *her* humanness. *She* was not turned to dispirited ash. She

could begin to *understand* the emotional dysregulation and its near week-long hangover and soothe herself over time. Her thinking integrated with the powerful, somatically based affective states that had historically so derailed her. She could inhabit her mind and body in an integrated way.

I think there is an overlap here between Jung's and Winnicott's perspectives. Winnicott (1960) describes inner bodily felt experience—"the warm animal of one's body"—as a foundation for integration, and Jung (1930–1934/1997) speaks about a felt experience of connection with an animal and the earth. Indwelling in the body and dwelling in direct experience with one's earth cuts through dissociative splitting, anchors one in relation to a wisdom that is derived from a felt knowing.

Jung is talking about a person's link with the natural world very similarly to how he describes establishing a link to one's inner world of the objective psyche: as establishing an *axis* from *ego to Self* or *ego to nature*, as though the latter contains the former. This perspective elucidates a Self that is interdependent, embedded in the living earth.

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Perhaps in the long work of our species finding how to dwell in our bodies on this earth, we become frightened by the overwhelming and at times terrifying forces of nature and of death and abstract ourselves from our bodies and the earth, or alternately we overengage, becoming mesmerized by our capacity to dominate and alter the land (or our bodies) for our own needs.

Both are reactive states of disconnection in which we neither indwell our bodies nor the earth.

What about God? This question kept returning in subsequent hours of my work with Renée. She'd explore it thoughtfully, then leave it and move into personal material and enter her feeling body. Something was still cooking. I initially sensed it as a distance between us. I came to understand it as a shift of the trust she had situated as residing in my power or in some distant God, to a trust in herself. Not clinging quite so tightly to each interchange between us, she had more capacity to self-reflect.

One day as she worked with an emotionally triggering episode of sexual harassment that had occurred at work, a veil lifted. She could perceive her own struggle: the struggle to differentiate from a father who had acted out his needs in inappropriate ways with her and her struggle with the overwhelming experience of being with an abandoning mother.

She jumped in saying this all connected to what she'd been trying to get at about her belief in God: "I have just held to a hope that there would be an adjudication. I couldn't describe or know what was happening when I was a kid, or untangle it and communicate it as an adult. It was so muddy and confusing. I just trusted, hoped, that God saw and knew it was wrong and I would get a second chance when I died." Tears welled and fell down her face.

Being with this raw place together ameliorated her aloneness in a way that she expressed as feeling somehow different than ever before.

EMERGENCE

There was a reordering in that moment. What had felt like distrust or distance dissolved. Renée emerged seeming more separate, autonomous yet connected. A deep surge of energy rose in her, and she moved through her life with a different sense of agency.

She began to speak of wanting to get to know the mountains near her land that lay in a direction she had rarely noticed. She named the mountains to the north, south, and west. The other mountain that lay in the east, she did not know. She ferreted out its name. I spoke to her about the Navajos' marking of their land by the sacred mountains in the four directions. She took this in quietly.

Outside of her job, Renée had seldom focused on concerns beyond her own. A fresh interest arose in a wild-lands conservancy group that worked

to preserve and honor the areas that surrounded her farm. With a new lack of ambivalence, she wanted to participate. Engaging in a purpose was quite new and happened rather seamlessly. Synchronistically, the group planned to hike the mountain to the east that she wanted to come to know.

The hike to the mountain that lay to the east awed her. Spring had arrived. Wild flowers covered the hills. Hawks flew overhead, songbirds accented the quiet. Scents never noticed announced themselves, and companions helped her to learn names and behaviors of living things, all of which she loved learning. *Rather shyly she told me how she did not want to step off the path for concern she would trample the sacred life.* Seeing that I was open to her concern, she spoke more about her experience. She said a vulnerability opened in her. It was what she had always wanted, like what she felt when she first moved to her farm and when she had hiked to the lake, but even more complete. She felt some anxieties about her interactions with others, but these did not override the moments of awe when all her senses opened and her heart as well. She could share what mattered to her with others.

About this time Renée came to session heart-sickened by the Gulf oil spill, and together we felt into the pain and wrenching sadness. She worked through feelings of helplessness where before she may have lost herself as her sense of helplessness merged with the wildlife she perceived as helpless. She was moved to write letters to her representative, senator, and the president. She was engaged. She was redeeming her own life, aligning with a sense of agency and inner knowing. The ego–Self axis was coming into focus. She was living in this life versus clinging to an abstract notion of a just afterlife or of a fantasy about an impossible relationship between us.

RESTORATION

The natural world has been the primary locus of numinous experiences and the sacred for people across time and culture. For Renée, experiences of being in wild, relatively untouched places in the land have been pivotal, restorative, and ordering of a sense of meaning, like ritual. I have begun to imagine the whole narrative of her analysis as something like a long Beautyway ceremony of the Navajo peoples.

In the Navajo view, the elements of one's interior life—one's psychological makeup and moral bearing—are subject to a persistent principle of disarray. Beautyway is, in part, a spiritual invocation of the order of the exterior universe, that irreducible, holy complexity that manifests itself as all things changing through

time. . . . The purpose of the invocations is to recreate in the individual who is the subject of the Beautyway ceremony that same order, to make the individual again a reflection of the myriad enduring relationships of the landscape. (Lopez, 1978, p. 67)

CLOSING THOUGHTS ON EMERGENCE, RESTORATION, AND SUSTAINABILITY

I have come to think of the relationship of wilderness to earth as a parallel of dreams to the individual. Both dreams and wilderness are realms where life unfolds without our egos dominating or managing; places where diversity emerges and things live and flourish, the creative source of all life. It is from wilderness that our lives emerged.

For a moment, imagine a life in which there are no dreams to regulate, restore, and bring balance to the individual. Now imagine a world in which all of nature is colonized by us: no trace of wilderness . . . the whole of the natural world colonized and used in an ego-saturated way . . . cities, highways, parking lots, industry. I believe the loss of truly wild natural communities would be to the earth like a loss of dreams to the individual. There would be no restoration; life would not be sustainable.

Just as we hold our intention to live in relation to the Self in a world gone berserk with ego-driven, one-sided perspectives, it is possible—and perhaps never has it been as urgently necessary—that we also cultivate a relation to nature, an axis from ego to nature or from ego to ecological Self. For it is not only that we live in the natural world, the natural world lives in us.

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