CREATING PSYCHOTHERAPY FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT *This paper asks how psychotherapy needs to change in the service of creating a sustainable future. It examines the meaning of sustainability and explores the concept of self in relation to nature and culture, with the help of descriptions from an indigenous cosmology. The paper asks how we identify with the larger whole, and why we disidentify and disconnect from it, and suggests that psychotherapy is a powerful tool for reconnection with our world, but that it would benefit from expanding beyond its human-centredness, to embrace our relationship with the other-than-human world. This would involve relating to nature as subject and embracing our anthropocentrism. The paper questions how this might play itself out both in our everyday lives, and within our internal worlds.*

Key words: ecopsychology, sustainability, anthropocentrism

In order to create a sustainable future – and what could be a more pressing matter? – we must change the way we live. Such a change goes way beyond a practical fixing of social and environmental issues. Rather, it demands a *paradigm shift,* which affects each and every one of us in all areas of our lives. While political policies need to change, we also need to take individual responsibility for how we contribute to the degradation of the environment.

As a psychotherapist who works in a room in a large city, I am interested to explore how such a paradigm shift affects my practice. Over the past decade I have become increasingly unsettled by the tension I experience between the patience required to engage with another in the process of long, slow, detailed and deep change, versus the urgency to create a sustainable society for future generations of humans – indeed, for all life on this planet.

The question that arises out of this tension is: how *does* psychotherapy need to change, theoretically and in practice, in the service of creating a sustainable future? This is complex, for it ranges from how cultural and global affairs affect and shape our internal and external worlds, to how we feel about being part of the very consumer culture that is causing this crisis, to how we conceive of, and connect with, nature, culture and the larger whole, to how our long, slow, deep process of change might contribute to the creation of sustainability, and more.

If we do not make these connections to the dilemmas of the wider world, are psychotherapists in danger of relieving peoples' anxiety, only to place them back

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within a society that is deeply out of balance? So the cry of 'something is terribly wrong' is seen as just to do with 'me', rather than to do with 'the human community's relationship with the rest of the world and my place within that'.

Before I address this question, I will first flesh out the meaning of sustainability and its relation to psychotherapy.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

To be able to sustain something is to be able to continue on with it in a lasting way. A sustainable society is one that can continue into the foreseeable future, without putting itself into a life-threatening situation, or jeopardizing the survival of future generations.

Our Western consumer lifestyle is entirely unsustainable. We are witnessing a worsening social and environmental crisis unfolding within industrial growth society, as it spreads rapidly across the globe. The most troubling symptoms of this crisis are global warming, a widening gap between rich and poor and a mass extinction of species, which is proceeding at a faster rate than all five other mass extinction spasms within the history of life on earth.

How did our society become so *unsustainable?* At a deeper level, it has much to do with the way in which we relate to, or perceive, nature. Throughout our long and complex history of colonization of nature and peoples has arisen a hierarchy in which the white, Western, middle-class, modern male stands at the top, dominating all other life forms in a series of decreasing rank. The other-than-human world sits firmly below humans, as a collection of resources to be exploited as we wish.

But this is not just about an outer nature, or certain peoples. This is a struggle between a dominant, controlling, logical, intellectual, 'above nature', modern mind versus the intuitive, sensual, emotional, 'close to nature' archaic mind. This archetypal split has become ever more exaggerated by the direction of our culture. The further we retreat from the wilds of nature, the more our archaic mind and animal nature has been denigrated. Psychotherapy has grappled with this split since the time of Freud.

So creating a sustainable culture, a project that began several decades ago, requires a revisioning of all that Western culture has denigrated, a reintegrating of what has been split apart. It involves challenging centuries of dominance and oppression of peoples and nature.

During the last few decades, various psychotherapists have been exploring how dominance and oppression within the human community becomes internalized. For example, feminist psychotherapists have written extensively about how a patriarchal society can shape the individual psyche through the nuclear family, from the earliest moments of life (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1982). Similar work has been done by other therapists in the area of race (Morgan, 2001). These influences necessarily come right into the transference and counter-transference. One might call this the exploration of the social aspects of sustainability within psychotherapy.

We have yet to explore anthropocentrism more extensively, the dominance and oppression of the other-than-human world by humans. For we increasingly treat nature as object, not subject, relegating it to, in David Abram's words, 'a conglomeration of objects and objective processes independent of subjectivity and sentience' (Fisher, 2002, ix). This could be said to be at the heart of our environmental crisis. For if we no longer try to control or manage a wild and anarchic nature, we

must learn how to live with, and relate to, our precious nature.

As psychotherapists, we are still entirely concerned with human relationships, not acknowledging the part that the other-than-human world may play in our lives. As Harold Searles stated, over 40 years ago:

> The nonhuman environment . . . is, by implication, considered as irrelevant to human personality development, and to the development of psychiatric illness, as though human life were lived out in a vacuum – as though the human race were alone in the universe, pursuing individual and collective destinies in a homogenous matrix of nothingness, a background devoid of form, color, and substance. (Searles, 1960, 3)

A movement called ecopsychology has emerged in the last two decades, attempting to connect psychological and ecological worlds (see Prentice, 2003, for an overview of the ecopsychology movement). It speaks about the psychological roots and impact of our current environmental crisis, of the healing power of nature, of the insights that a psychological approach has to offer towards the current paradigm shift, and more. Most of its practitioners and theorists are based in the US, and are rooted in humanistic psychology. These ecopsychologists are developing a wide variety of practices, including working with people outside, on the land, in the wilds, in order to experience and explore the human-nature relationship (see, for example, Grut, 2002). Other practitioners are expanding and challenging our current psychotherapeutic methods in urban settings, looking at the role of the other-than-human world in developmental and psychological health (Johnstone, 2002). There are also a few writers from other traditions, such as psychoanalyst Harold Searles (Searles, 1960) and CG Jung who wrote on aspects of this field many years ago. Indeed, Jung claims that his relationship to the earth is the foundation upon which all his work rests, and his writings are full of interesting insights about our relationship with nature (Jung, 1967).

In this paper, I will explore some aspects of how we might expand our current ways of thinking and practice within psychotherapy so that we take account of, and *relate* to, nature. This, I suggest, is a key part of creating a psychotherapy that is in the service of a sustainable future. As a Jungian analyst, art therapist and feminist I will be writing about psychotherapy through the lens of these theoretical frameworks. I have been most influenced by them, and am most familiar with them.

Fundamental to dismantling anthropocentrism is to acknowledge that we humans are part of a web of life, rather than superior to it. I will start by asking what concepts we have to speak about the 'larger whole' around us, our 'eco-psyche-system'. How does this relate to our concept of 'self'? Here I will draw on the description of self from an indigenous culture, which weaves self, culture and nature together into a seamless whole. I will ask how and why we identify with, and disidentify from, this larger whole.

I will discuss how our current struggle of modern 'above nature' mind versus ancient 'close to nature' mind becomes internalized – for this is surely the way in which anthropocentrism is reflected in our inner worlds. If we can but relate psychotherapy more closely to the issues of the wider world, it becomes a powerful tool for the creation of a sustainable self.

SEEING OURSELVES WITHIN A LARGER WHOLE, AN 'ECO-PSYCHE-SYSTEM'

Most kinds of psychotherapy now recognize the importance of the 'relational field'

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between therapist and client. We no longer see ourselves as separate beings, but as an interdependent community. What if we extended this human relational field into a relational field of life, and considered our ecosystem to be one great bodily interdependent system within which we all lived – one that was infused with psyche? For under, over, beside and within, without and through our human communities, is our ecological family, our habitat, which sustains us, nourishes us with undying beauty, teaches us about light and dark, elements, and the cosmos through the sky by day and night, and more.

Similar ways of seeing ourselves in relation to the world is not new. *Anima mundi* was a term used by Plato to mean 'the whole of the cosmos as a single great organism', which has feeling, intelligence and soul (Roszak, 1992, 139). Modern ecopsychologists refer to the work of astrophysicists Lovelock and Margulis and their Gaia hypothesis, which suggests that the Earth's entire organic-inorganic system can be considered a living being intricately tied together through feedback loops and homoeostasis. Lovelock and Margulis named this system 'Gaia' after the Greek Goddess of the Earth (Dunann Winter, 1997, 251). Most indigenous cultures understand that humans are part of a larger living system. If humans do not respect this system, then the resulting imbalance will cause illness, community disharmony or disturbance within the other-than-human world, such as bad hunting or drought (M von Hildebrand, personal communication).

CG Jung is one of several psychotherapists who names the larger 'being' that we inhabit, and sees our connection with it as an important part of healthy development, and of the healing process. He called this larger being 'the Self', with a capital 'S', while the self with a small 's' he saw as a reflection of the great Self. Part of the difficulty with Jung's concept of the Self is that it has become rather mystical, divorced from its physical manifestations. Jung himself says that the Self is synonymous with God (Jung, 1977, volume 7, 238). This is confusing in a culture where God is seen as separate from physical matter, or when spirit is primary and matter arises out of it. Jung did not intend the Self to be spirit divorced from matter, but more like some kind of energetic system, both matter and spirit at once, which has its own intelligence. Like the Chinese Tao, it is something that is eternally mystifying, an intelligence way beyond our understanding, and hence very hard to speak about (Jung, 1977, volume 18, 720).

I have referred, here, to several forms of larger 'bodies' that we inhabit. Margulis and Lovelock's Gaia refers to the earth's living system. Plato's *anima mundi* refers to the living system of our cosmos, while Jung's 'Self' speaks of the Great Beyond. What matters here is that we acknowledge that we humans are part of a larger, living, eco-psyche-system; that we are utterly dependent on, and nourished by, this larger body in all kinds of ways; that this larger body profoundly affects our development and health.

What are the implications of this perspective in practice? Acknowledging and exploring our relationship to the earth-body-psyche could take many forms. We might explore the idea that *place* plays a part in shaping our psyche, alongside the influence of our particular human community; that a relationship with mountains might be utterly different to a relationship with flat lands; that some places feel like 'home' and others do not, wherever our place of origin; that human-made urban environments would shape our psyche in quite a different way to a rural upbringing.

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Particular land formations, such as caves or rivers, might be especially relevant for certain individuals.

Part of exploring landscape includes climate, and relationship to elements such as water. Most people have a sense of where they feel most comfortable, but how far do we explore the psychological dimensions of these most fundamental aspects of life?

Along with place, we could explore our relationships with other-than-human beings. Most children yearn for a special relationship with an animal; this is not necessarily a substitute for human relationships, but an experience of a different kind of relationship, of equal importance. Or could a relationship with stone, for example, be a part of getting to know about the 'I' that is composed of stardust, that goes backwards, and forwards, to eternity? In his autobiography, Jung describes how, as a youth, his relationship with stone helped him to know the eternal part of himself:

> I was brooding . . . at such times it was strangely reassuring and calming to sit on my stone. Somehow it would free me of all my doubts. Whenever I thought I was the stone, the conflict ceased. 'The stone has no uncertainties, no urge to communicate, and is eternally the same for thousands of years,' I would think, 'while I am only a passing phenomenon which bursts into all kinds of emotions, like a flame that flares up quickly and then goes out' I was but the sum of my emotions, and the 'Other' in me was the timeless imperishable stone. (Jung, 1967, 59)

Just as we learn to be aware and take care of other humans, so we might develop an awareness of the other-than-human world. Part of psychological health might be seen as a desire to nourish and take care of this 'parental' eco-psyche-system, which has nourished and taken care of us. Along with individual and familial restoration, could psychotherapy also recognize the need for earth restoration as an essential part of its process?

These are just a few examples of the many different ways in which we could explore our relationship to the other-than-human world.

A PERSPECTIVE FROM AN INDIGENOUS CULTURE: A MORE INCLUSIVE VISION OF SELF

If we are to see ourselves as interdependent with the great web of life, we need a concept of self that is more interwoven with nature and culture. We are used to defining 'self' as all that is contained within our individual skin. Other cultures have differing views of where an individual self begins and ends. Buddhism claims there no such thing as self, since it implies something static, and all things are always in a process of change.

Since most indigenous cultures regard humans as living within an inextricably linked web of life it is interesting to recover their way of seeing, where human community and nature intersect within the human individual. I am not saying this can be simply grafted onto a modern healing system. But since their vision of self is within all of our histories, it provides inspiration from which we can create a concept of a modern 'sustainable self'.

The following quotations are from a piece written by Jeannette Armstrong, a woman from the Okanagan Native American tradition. She describes the individual human being as made up of four main capacities, of equal importance, which operate together: the physical self, the emotional self, the thinking, intellectual self and the spiritual self. Each of these

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capacities 'can loosely be described as what joins us with the rest of creation in a helpful way', and each 'is an internal capacity parallel to what is thought of as "mind"' (Rozsak, 1995, 320).

Of the physical self, Armstrong says:

> We survive within our skin inside the rest of our vast selves . . . Okanagans teach that our flesh, blood and bones, are Earth-body; in all cycles in which the earth moves, so does our body . . . Our word for body literally means 'the land-dreaming capacity'. (Armstrong, 1995, 320–1)

Of the emotional self, she writes:

> We use a term which translates as 'heart'. It is a capacity to bond and form attachment with particular parts and aspects of our surroundings . . . We never ask a person, 'What do you think?' Instead, we ask, 'What is your heart on the matter?' The Okanagan teaches that emotion or feeling is the capacity whereby community and land intersect in our beings and become part of us. This bond or link is a priority for our individual wholeness or well-being. (Armstrong, 1995, 321)

The thinking, intellectual self she describes as:

> The words that come closest in my interpretation have the meaning 'the spark that ignites' . . . We use a term that translates as 'directed by the ignited spark' to refer to analytical thought . . . the other capacities we engage in when we take action are only directed by the spark of memory once it is ignited. We know . . . that unless we always join this capacity to the heart-self, its power can be a destructive force both with respect to ourselves and to the larger selves that surround us. A fire that is not controlled can destroy. (Armstrong, 1995, 321)

Lastly, she writes of the spirit-self:

> The spirit-self is hardest to describe. We translate [it] . . . as 'without substance while continuously moving outward' . . . This self requires great quietness before our other parts can become conscious of it, and that the other capacities fuse together in order to activate something else – which is this capacity . . . this old part of us can 'hear/interpret' all knowledge being spoken by all things around us, including our own bodies, in order to bring new knowledge into exist. (Armstrong, 1995, 322)

One really gets the sense that we are more like the limbs of a whole earth-body, rather than separate individuals, and that our health, in all ways, depends on our bond with 'our vast selves'.

How would this compare to our psychotherapeutic ways of conceiving the human self? To some extent these aspects are already reflected in our ways of thinking. We have made great progress in retrieving our emotional and intuitive selves from a place of denigration and even madness. But psychotherapy's relationship with the body is still tentative, and an extension into relating with the body of the earth is non-existent, apart from recognising our need to be grounded in the world of 'objective' reality. The spiritual self is still only for certain 'fringe' therapies, although it is a place in which we can consider the existence of ourselves living within a larger whole, albeit a mystical one, unrelated to matter.

What of the self in relation to the wider world? Andrew Samuels speaks of the political development of the self (Samuels, 1993). Norwegian ecophilosopher, Arne Naess, coined the term 'ecological self' back in 1973. He sees the key feature of this term as the extension of our capacity to identify. He writes:

> The ecological self of a person is that with which this person identifies . . . We may be in, of and for nature from our very beginning. Society and human relations are very important, but our self is richer in its constitutive relations. These relations are not only relations we have with humans and the human community, but with the larger community of all living beings. (Seed et al., 1988, 20–1)

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It is this capacity to identify, and the extension of it, that I will discuss next.

IDENTITY, IDENTIFICATION, AND RELATIONSHIP: *HOW* DO WE IDENTIFY?

The vision of the Okanagan people reminds us that a human being is bound by skin, and also extends beyond that, to 'the rest of our vast selves', and that 'our flesh, blood and bones, are Earth-body'. How might we form an identity that is differentiated from our larger eco-psyche-system but, at the same time, be able to identify with that beyond our skins?

Our identity, or self, is by no means a fixed or separate state, but more of an ongoing flow of experience that moves between different psychic states, feeling differentiated enough from the other to be able to identify with it and relate to it while remaining grounded in one's own identity. Part of the experience between therapist and client requires a strong enough sense of identity on the part of the therapist to be able to identify with some potentially extreme states of the client, the sense of falling apart, or the experience of traumatic and undifferentiated states of being, as well as being able to think and feel through the experience.

Identification is, then, part of getting to *know* the other, and oneself. An individual identity is never fully formed, but is in a lifelong process of growing, shedding and constantly changing, in relation to all that surrounds us. While our culture would encourage an adult independence, implying *separation,* an Okanagan and relational perspective encourages interdependence, implying *differentiation* from, but always in relation to, the rest of life. Identification helps us to form an identity and connects us to the other in relationship; the root of the word 'relate' is to 'carry again'.

The process of identification involves many aspects of ourselves from a bodily, visceral, physical experience, to a stretching of the imagination into the other's position, to a thinking and feeling through.

Jungian analyst Roderick Peters links this imaginal process to the body. In his paper, 'The eagle and the serpent' (Peters, 1987) he illustrates how these creatures often appear in his patients' dreams, and in stories through the ages. He describes how both the eagle and the serpent seem to stand for particular archetypal experiences, engaged in an age-old struggle with one another. He describes 'serpent-mind' as an experience of the dark earth, a power of a deep and inward kind, piercing and paralysing, associated with the elements of water and earth, and with femininity. It is more aligned with earth-based, shamanic or pagan spirituality, rooted in matriarchal cultures. 'Eagle mind' he describes as an experience of flying above things, getting an overview, associated with the masculine gods of power and war. In symbolic terms it is fire, air and spirit; it is linked with the sky gods of the more recent patriarchal cultures, who replaced the earth gods.

He then connects the experience of eagle-mind with our more recently evolved central nervous system, and serpent-mind with the older, autonomic nervous system (ANS). Of the ANS he writes:

> We see the ANS as the anatomical basis of the ancient 'serpent-mind'; the mind of the realm of blood and viscera. This mind is lodged deep in collectivities. Blood-mind belongs, as it were, to universal blood; if I see someone gashed and bleeding, my blood-mind is affected almost as if it were 'my' blood. It is as if there were no boundary between me and that wounded person . . . it is an activity of the ancient mind. (Peters, 1987, 373)

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This is a fascinating description of how we might identify with the other through a part of our bodies. He continues:

> The experiences of one's bodily self which come when 'I' consciousness allows itself to descend into a participating awareness of autonomic system arousal are . . . our real connection to the past; we can go down and down through the unending evolutionary layers within our bodily nature, and feel a sense of linking up with the dimmest and deepest roots of life. Through it we can know renewal, as if we have touched vitality itself. The descent feels full of dangers because we know we have gone into the power of the old serpent . . . The 'I' that consciously experiences the activity of autonomic matter is all but submerged in feelings of oneness, oceanic feelings, feelings of isolation, abandonment, eternity, infinity, fear, love, hatred, rage; all the passions in fact. (Peters, 1987, 373–4)

Indigenous cultures enable a deep reconnection with this ancient part of ourselves through ritual, where an altered or trance state of consciousness allows each individual, within a group, to expand into the vast self as fully as possible, while being held within a contained space, so as not to fragment completely and go mad. It is said that this practice of regular reconnection has always been necessary for humans, because their capacity for consciousness tended to separate them from the rest of life (Seed et al., 1988, 35–9). As Okanagan teaching reminds us, if our thinking capacity becomes separated from the rest of our selves, it has great destructive potential, which we are now seeing played out.

How *do* we reconnect with our vast self in modern culture? Sexual union is perhaps the most frequent and profound way we have of feeling some kind of body-mind sense of merging with another, and orgasm a momentary release from 'I' place. Indeed, there may be many ways in which human individuals and communities connect to one another, but there are few practices that reconnect us together through our whole beings, bringing together individual, culture and nature. Food, alcohol, sex and drug binges are like remnants of this struggle to reconnect, symptoms of a society that fails to meet this deep inner longing.

A regular practice of reconnection with our vast self is, I suggest, vital to the creation of a sustainable future. Losing a connection with the earth, with our bodies, with a regular experience of 'serpent mind', with the ground of our being, leads to a vicious circle of destructiveness towards self, other and the earth. Alongside this, the process of globalization disconnects relationships and erodes our capacity to identify. Understanding our capacity to disidentify is also important in the creation of sustainability.

DESTRUCTION, SPLITTING, AND DISCONNECTION: WHY DO WE DISIDENTIFY?

Rix Weaver, an Australian Jungian Analyst, wrote (some 20 years ago): 'Who is calling me to establish a relationship? Is that not the question of today? To answer it we have to realise the pain and agony of the primeval forest, to know it as our own' (Meier, 1985, 89).

Deep ecologist and rainforest activist John Seed suggests that if we could identify with the other-than-human world, we would be less likely to abuse it (Seed et al., 1988). If we had a wider sense of self we would know and *feel* the damage we were doing to our larger body. This is more apparent when living as a small tribe compared to the complexity of living in a large city. How far can we truly identify with another species? A great deal of terrible abuse and destructiveness happens between humans;

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what happens to our capacity to identify here?

Identification with the other is far more complicated in our modern world. We are constantly receiving news about the state of the planet; it is overwhelming and impossible to identify with all the tragedy and injustice we hear of. We all find ways of dealing with and protecting ourselves from this; most of us use splitting and denial as a means of getting on with our daily lives.

The process of globalization enables disidentification, for we are increasingly disconnected from the origins of things. Many people are now displaced from their land of origin and from their extended families. We are rarely aware of how food is produced, or how the clothes we wear, and the multitude of things we use daily, are made. How do we really feel when we discover that our T-shirt is made by a child in a sweatshop on the other side of the world? How do we feel when we make ourselves aware that the meat we are eating is from an animal kept in appalling factory farms, dosed with antibiotics, and killed in inhumane ways? It is easy to 'forget' these things when buying a neatly wrapped portion of chicken from a huge, sanitized supermarket, when the slaughterhouses are behind closed doors. We are so used to regarding the other-than-human world as something completely other, the silent other. Disidentification with certain human groups, using the same psychological mechanisms, enables the same kind of terrible violence to life.

This breaking of connections between humans and the world around them leads to a breakdown of trust in society. As psychotherapists we are witnesses to the more covert spread of internal fearfulness and breakdown of trust, even in our own common sense. The epidemic of eating problems amongst young, Western women, and increasingly men, is a prime example of how such lack of trust has entered right into our very relationship to our bodies, such that many people do not know how to listen to, and trust, their own hunger and fullness signals. This reveals an extremely fundamental disturbance in the relationship between ourselves and the world, which has come right into the earliest relationship between mother and baby, between mind and body (Orbach, 2003).

Cutting off from such feelings of pain in the process of disidentification involves a bodily numbing process. I was made more aware of this in a supervision group, which was focusing on the social and political material in our work as therapists. We were all given the task of listening to, watching or reading the news with our bodies and we all returned with a similar story. While members of the group had each listened with a different part of their body, no one had been able to sustain this, because it had become too painful. In cutting off from a level of bodily identification, from a way of relating through serpent-mind, we lose the ability to respond urgently, and it is all too easy to become used to a degraded society where pathological states are normalized.

In a traumatized world, there are still many ways to reconnect. Psychotherapy helps us to reconnect with ourselves, with other humans, with our individual human origins. Can it also help us to reconnect with the other-than-human world and, in turn, with our vast self?

THE NEED TO BOND WITH NATURE

Despite our long history of withdrawal from an intimate relationship with nature, it is often the case that humans yearn to spend time in nature to restore, heal and reconnect with themselves, and with that

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beyond themselves. This may be a holiday in a beautiful place, or simply a few hours in the local park, or in our own patch of garden. Most people need to connect with nature, as if it provides a safe and containing space in which to fall into reverie, or to fall apart and reintegrate, bathed in the beauty of the earth. At other times, nature reminds us of the forces to be reckoned with, that we humans are not omnipotent. Yet this important aspect of our lives often remains unarticulated and taken for granted. I am sure we can all identify with the following experience that Jung describes so beautifully: 'At times I feel like I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons' (Jung, 1967, 252).

Such deeply healing experiences often go entirely unacknowledged in the process of psychotherapy, as if the experience of being in nature is just time-out and disconnected from the 'real world' of life and work. Bonding with nature, even union with it, may be one of the only ways we have left in our modern world of profoundly connecting with something beyond the individual self and our human community, a way of reconnecting with our vast self. Most kinds of psychotherapy do not recognize the capacity for humans to have an experience of *union* with the other as part of adult maturity. Many Eastern religions would describe this capacity for union with the other, while paradoxically remaining oneself, a glimpse of enlightenment. Consider the following description by someone who experienced union with rock:

> I had just finished (some) . . . of the most enjoyable climbing I'd ever experienced . . . I set up a hanging belay, sitting in my harness adrift in a vast ocean of pale, warm rock . . . I found myself looking across to the cliffs . . . seeking out shapes formed as the patterns of shadow changed with the setting sun . . . I suddenly felt myself falling. This sensation of movement only lasted a very short time before I realised I wasn't falling at all, but the rock face on the opposite side of the valley seemed to be hinging backwards from its base . . .
>
> Next, I felt this incredible wave of warmth, like diving into a tropical sea . . . This was followed by a feeling of intense calm . . . I felt myself fall again, this time alarmingly backwards into the rock, merging with the rock face behind me. I melted into it, and I was suddenly aware that I was no longer a separate human form perched high on a granite wall – I was the granite wall. I could not feel myself as separate. This merging felt like continual movement, it was a sensation like swimming and the awareness of moving through liquid was very strong, although I had no concept of the surface of my skin . . .
>
> I felt a sharp intense pain in my right quadriceps . . . This had the effect of waking me up, an awkward term because I was not asleep . . . The burning sensation was a tear that had fallen from my cheek and landed on the skin of my bare leg. I was, by now, crying. My state was different now, there was no melting into the rock and the valley walls were solid and static. But I was infused with a feeling of incredible calm, I felt elated beyond description . . . it felt like there was no greater experience of life beyond the experience I had just had. (Key, 2003, 10–11)

This experience seems to be born out of an intense body-mind concentration and intimacy with the rock, followed by a dramatic shift in focus or gestalt. However, it took the author two years before he could speak about this, for fear of how it would be understood. For we have no frame for understanding and valuing such experiences within our culture, other than madness. Some psychotherapists might even frame it as a regressive yearning for a mother-baby merger experience, the rock simply being a mother object, not a being in its own right.

Dave Key describes how this experience changed his life. For him, the merging with

rock was feeling the earth as the rest of his 'vast self'. For example, he could no longer throw anything away; he had to recycle. He then discovered that many rock climbers knew the experience well; in fact many describe it as addictive. Perhaps this experience of merging with another is a greatly nourishing and absolutely necessary part of being human. It is simply another kind of experience, at the other end of the spectrum from separation. As this example shows, it is possible to identify with the other-than-human world. Once we feel deeply connected to our vast self, we feel a wish to look after it, to return the nourishment we have received. This reconnection is a move towards sustainability, a deep change.

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND RECONNECTION

Psychotherapy explores this longing for reconnection within a ritual space, indoors. We spend our time helping individuals to reconnect to 'the other' as therapist, to their current human relationships, and to their familial origins. I have been suggesting ways in which we can extend this reconnection to the earth, by being more receptive to an ongoing relationship to place, to other-than-human beings, and to various other aspects of our relationship with nature, both developmentally and in the present. These different kinds of relationships with the other-than-human world are often in existence, but not articulated or recognized as an important part of shaping the psyche, nor of the healing process. This is challenging our objectification of nature, and exploring how we might *relate* to it as *subject.* Once we form a relationship with it, we are more likely to take care of it.

How do we see anthropocentrism shaping our internal worlds, and how might it reveal itself in the therapy relationship? Using Peters' imaginative way of illustrating modern and ancient minds as eagle-mind and serpent-mind, we might say that we were in the grip of anthropocentrism if we wished for the eagle to always win the struggle, so that the serpent is overpowered, under control, or even dead. This might show itself in a multitude of ways; for example, as a disrespect for 'uneducated peasants' whose lives are seen as less than a modern, Western, educated life. Or it might be a disrespect for indigenous knowledge, regarding it as 'primitive', rather than a highly sophisticated form of knowledge that we find hard to comprehend. Or it might be a hatred of the body, of the feminine, or of any of those aspects of life and peoples that have become associated with being 'closer to nature'.

We can see, here, that anthropocentrism is entirely interwoven with racism, sexism and other forms of dominance and oppression, which various writers have already pointed out (Prentice, 2003; Fisher, 2002; Seed, 1988; Kidner, 2001). When we see this parallel, we are reminded of the interconnections between the colonization of a nature that threatens to overwhelm and endanger our safety, and the colonization of peoples who have been associated with nature, and are therefore felt to contain the same threat. Indigenous peoples, black peoples, and women are just some of the human communities that have been tarred with the same 'wild, unruly, animal-like and even mad' brush, labelled as 'primitives' or 'witches'.

So anthropocentrism might shape our psyches in the form of a disrespect and denigration of those parts of ourselves that are closer to nature, our animal selves, our other-than-human selves, the wild parts of ourselves. This includes the feminine and

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the 'other-than-Western', not because they are *necessarily* closer to nature but because they have been associated with nature by Western culture. This cultural perspective serves as a backdrop within industrial growth society, and is woven into our individual lives in different ways according to our family of origin, and place of origin.

Some good examples of how this process might manifest can be found amongst women with eating problems, for dieting is a case of eagle-mind controlling the wild nature of the body. Clients with eating problems dislike their bodies, for they do not conform to the thinness that Western culture declares as success.

Respecting serpent-mind involves trusting and listening to the body, sinking down into it, relearning how to read hunger and fullness signals, knowing the difference between different kinds of emotional hungers. While this may involve quite a long process of taking apart the years of control, learning how to respond to what the body is saying, eventually the body will find its own 'set point', a weight that is optimal for that person. This sustainable weight can never be found through the repeated attempts to control the body, for it is not respecting the body as *subject,* that it may have its own system of wisdom, which we can only begin to understand by patiently learning how to *relate* with it.

I imagine that many psychotherapists are already working in the service of sustainability by helping their clients to retrieve and reintegrate serpent-mind; to be aware of, and to explore, the struggle between eagle and serpent within, so that both kinds of thinking can be valued. For despite the fact that psychotherapy has emerged out of Western culture, and is profoundly influenced by it (as our conceptual frameworks reveal), there are still many ways in which its methods run counter to Western culture. It values a rich inner life over the goal of materialism; it encourages a listening attitude and the forming of relationships; it is about *exploring* fear, rather than colonizing wild and unknown territory in order to *control* fear and anxiety.

Indeed, psychotherapy may encourage the struggle between eagle and serpent to turn into a more fertile relationship, as in an early Mesopotamian myth where

> at the beginning of things, the eagle and the serpent had sworn a solemn oath of friendship. The eagle had its nest and its young in the top of the World Tree, while the serpent and its young lived at the bottom. They undertook to protect and provide food for each other's young. (Peters 1987, 362)

Within the experience of transference and counter-transference, deep attunement with a client is possible through serpent-mind, going deep down inside, into the darkness of the body and feeling realm. Through serpent-mind we pick up all kinds of feelings, images and bodily states within the field of the client. It has more to do with subjective experience and identification with the other. Our eagle mind soars above to get more of a whole picture of things, to think things through. This is more about getting an objective picture of the whole situation, disentangling oneself from the identification with the other. This movement between these two realms enables the development of wisdom and compassion, both intrapsychically and between therapist and client.

While we may be already supporting this paradigm shift towards sustainability in many ways, it would seem important to bring to awareness these pressing issues, to look more closely at the ways in which we may blindly support cultural belief

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systems which are destructive to our species. The current eerie silence amongst the psychotherapy profession about environmental issues may speak volumes about the fears we have about tackling the overwhelming, complex, and painful territory that lies beneath the surface. Perhaps it is made more difficult by the fact that, as inhabitants of the rich and powerful West, we are all oppressors, as well as being oppressed by this cultural system.

CONCLUSION

I have been exploring how some aspects of the theory and practice of psychotherapy might change in the service of a sustainable future. I have suggested that this requires a paradigm shift, a dismantling of the hierarchies that facilitate dominance and oppression with the human community, and between humans and our environment. Fundamental to this shift is to respect that all aspects of the living system that we inhabit are capable of subjectivity. This involves expanding our theory and practice to bring into awareness the larger whole to which we belong, our eco-psyche-system. I have explored how we might identify with, and differentiate ourselves from, this larger whole.

I have highlighted a parallel process between sustainability in Western culture and in the human individual. For if we live within a society that is deeply unsustainable, which disconnects, which promotes separation, this will be reflected within all parts of our living system, and within our intrapsychic and interpersonal human relationships, leading to the breakdown of trust and the creation of terror within that system.

Psychotherapy encourages reconnection and relationship within and between humans, a revaluing of what has been lost and denigrated; it attempts to include all parts of any system. Disconnection and reconnection, separation and bonding, are then valued in themselves as part of a necessary cycle, two ends of a spectrum between which we may flow. Diversity is recognized as a necessary foundation for creativity. However, we must take care not to limit ourselves to human relationship within a Western frame. Discovering a sustainable psychotherapy involves embracing cultural biodiversity. It challenges us to go beyond the colonizing monoculture of the white, Western, middle-class, urban dominance within our profession, to acknowledge our dependence on the other-than-human world, and on the other-than-Western world.

My main focus has been to explore the human-nature relationship, and I have suggested that a relationship with the other-than-human world can be a powerful, healing and intensely nourishing place, an avenue of connection to the larger whole. Further, this reconnection involves a bodily and imaginative process where we can rediscover our vast selves, breaking the bounds of our limited, personal psyche, dissolving the inner-outer split.

Finding a sustainable self involves a process of eagle and serpent minds working together, moving between a soaring-above, differentiated, objective view, and an earthy, inside, embodied view. As with the feminist psychotherapy movement, it may take some time to become more familiar with the issues of sustainability within ourselves as therapists, and within our culture. Only then can we be more aware of how and when to work with these issues within the therapy relationship. These reflections are some thoughts along the way.

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