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Climate on the Couch: Unconscious Processes In Relation To Our Environmental Crisis

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A revised version of a talk given as the Annual Lecture for The Guild of Psychotherapists in London on 17 November 2007.

ABSTRACT *This revised lecture is an exploration of our psychological attitudes underlying climate change and ecological crisis. The central question is whether psychological insights can contribute to the collective change we need to make towards sustainable living. Part One explores two major myths that underpin Western culture: The Myth of the Fall and The Myth of Progress. Our readings of these stories keep us trapped in destructive ways of living. In particular, Western culture has developed a long-held fear of wild nature, both inner and outer. Civilization is experienced as a defence against nature. This stands in contrast to an indigenous worldview, where humans respect the balance that needs to be kept between humans and the rest of nature. How do we find a way of working with nature in this modern age? Part Two explores our personal responses to, and fantasies about, sustainable living. Consumerism has become an opiate of the people, in order to subdue our wild internal nature. Such an addictive relationship blocks us from thinking, and prevents us from taking action. Recovery involves reinhabiting our bodies, developing what Naess describes as an ecological identity. Part Three explores how these issues might enter into our work as therapists and how we might respond. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: progress, climate change, consumerism, unconscious

There are three things I want to talk about today:

- Where we are now and the stories we live by
- The psychological task of change
- The climate *of* the couch – do we need a new climate for psychotherapy?

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PART ONE: WHERE WE ARE NOW AND THE STORIES WE LIVE BY

We find ourselves in a global crisis and there is no doubt that something has gone seriously awry with our relationship to our environment. We witness nothing less than an assault on our life-support systems by humans in industrial growth society.

Over the past two years there has been a massive shift in awareness about this crisis. We hear daily diagnoses on the state of the planet from our scientists, like doctors reading the body of the earth – *our* collective body. Our temperature is set to rise by 2 °C at least in the coming years, our ice caps are predicted to melt within 35 years, our glaciers sooner. Our sea levels are rising as a result, our weather patterns are changing unpredictably… and those are just a small fraction of our physical symptoms. There is nowhere to escape and there is no guarantee that humans – and many other species – will survive. We are confronted by the fact that our earth has limits and we cannot continue to consume with no concern for the health of the whole ecosystem.

The changes to our ecosystems may come sooner than we predict. We are told we have a small window of time within which to act – 10 years at most; after that, things will take their own course and we will just have to adapt to the changes as best we can.

Those are the physical symptoms. What of our psychological state? Ecopsychologist Hilary Prentice writes:

> Is the human species suicidal? Apparently so – engaging in behaviour that is destructive to everything on which it depends, but apparently in serious denial of this… Unresolved dependency needs? Absolutely! We act as though we are not totally dependent on these others, as though can afford to abuse everything… of which our world is made… We seem to have an overweening narcissism, such that all other species and elements of the world appear to be there to please and gratify our every whim… (Prentice, 2001, 7)

I could go on, but I think you get the picture.

The roots of our crisis go back such a long way, through the history of our Western culture. I can only hope to pull out a few strands of the stories we live by today.

I'm going to begin by reading two very different descriptions of human relationship with nature. The first is the words of Native American, Jeannette Armstrong, of the Okanagan tribe, who describes the human self as inextricably interwoven with the web of life:

> 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'… 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. (Roszak et al., 1996, 320–1)

This second quote is from Freud. It tells us something about our Western perspective:

> The principle task of civilisation, its actual raison d'être, is to defend us against nature. We all know that in many ways civilisation does this fairly well already, and clearly as time goes on it will do it much better. But no one is under the illusion that nature has already been vanquished; and few dare hope that she will ever be entirely subjected to man. There are the elements which seem to mock at all human control; the earth which quakes and is torn apart and buries all human life and its works; water, which deluges and drowns everything in turmoil; storms, which blow everything before them… With

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> these forces nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable; she brings to our mind once more our weakness and helplessness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilisation. (Freud, 1961, 15–16)

Freud describes how we have battled *against* nature to build Western civilization. This attitude is familiar to us all from our education; our history is portrayed as an epic, heroic journey from a primitive dark world of ignorance to a brighter world of ever-increasing knowledge, freedom and wellbeing. This progress was made possible by the birth of human reason and the modern mind; it's all about onwards and upwards. Some people call this our 'Myth of Progress' (Tarnas, 2007, 12).

What we were not taught at school is the shadow of that Myth. Jeannette Armstrong's quote is just one illustration of many indigenous societies who lived for thousands of years, in a richly sophisticated communion of community, land, culture and spirit. Freud reminds us of our very different Western cultural perspective: that in an effort to escape our vulnerability we gradually learned how to manipulate the world around us. This has led to the desire to dominate nature and consequently the creation of a hierarchy of life. At the top sits white, Western, male, middle-class, urban, 'civilized' life and its values.

From this vantage point, nature – both nature 'out there' as well as our own human nature – is seen as wild, brutal and out of control. Certain groups of humans are branded as being closer to the earth, seen as having a 'lower', more animal nature and for some this justifies their domination and abuse. The genocide of indigenous cultures, African slavery and the oppression of women are three examples of this.

The end result of our Myth of Progress is that we see ourselves as separate from and superior to the rest of life. We treat those supposedly 'underneath' as resources to use as we please – land, creatures, as well as peoples. This is a form of oppression that Deep Ecologist John Seed describes as anthropocentrism. He writes: 'Anthropocentrism… means human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute "human race" for "man" and "all other species" for "woman".' (Seed et al., 1988, 35)

Some writers (such as Baring and Cashford, 1993; Tarnas, 2007) suggest that this shadow side of the Myth of Progress is reflected in the Myth of the Fall. The story of how Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden can be read as a description of our separation from nature. But the traditional interpretation leaves us with unending guilt for this original sin of eating from the tree of knowledge and separating from nature. We are told we must atone for our flawed nature and that there is no way back to the garden.

When we remind ourselves of the kind of *climate* that we have all grown up in, for thousands of years, it's little wonder that we find ourselves in such turbulence. This is the climate that needs putting on the couch today.

I think we would all agree that our current popular reading of these two stories, the Myth of Progress and the Myth of the Fall, have run their course. At this critical point in human history we most urgently need a myth to live by which is about living *with* nature, rather than fighting it. We need to rethink where we have fallen and what it means to progress. How can we progress to a life that benefits the whole earth community, not just wealthy humans?

Where we find ourselves, then, is between stories (Berry 1999), in a transitional space, a place of great turbulence, with little to hold onto save the ground of our own experience.

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Our therapeutic task, you might say, in this space of transition, is to understand how these myths still shape our internal worlds, our language, and our defences against change, as well as to see our own part in the oppression of others. Through shedding light on these shadows we might ask how we find renewal: what does it mean to return to The Garden?

For somewhere in the midst of 'sustainability' – a rather uninspiring word – lies an inspiring vision of transformation. But if this journey is simply a practical venture about behaviour change it will not appeal to our imaginations. We need to dig deep, to reread our own myths as well as find inspiration from the stories of others who are outside the box of western culture, and inside the web of life.

Having set the scene, I now want to return to the ways in which we respond to our current crisis, to see how these stories underly our present reality.

PART TWO: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TASK OF CHANGE

What are our responses to, and fantasies about, this crisis?

While few people would now deny the reality of climate change and environmental crisis, many people are still turning a blind eye to the situation we face. We are having great difficulty in making even the simplest of changes to our lives. The global scale of our crisis is very overwhelming and it is easy to feel apathetic in response. This is made easier when our consumer lifestyles keep us well within our comfort zones.

When we do allow ourselves to feel, we might find a whole range of strong emotions, such as anxiety and fear about the future, despair at our lack of political will, grief for so many losses, guilt that we continue to be part of the cause and more. While therapy has helped us to become more emotionally literate interpersonally, we are still a very 'stiff upper lip' culture in relation to the bigger picture; when we block out our feelings, we lose touch with the urgency of crisis.

As therapists we know that blocked feelings do not just go away. Take our guilt, for example: it is easy to project guilt into environmental activists and then make fun of them as earnest, bearded, killjoys (Randall, 2005, 14). Overwhelming guilt about the damage we have done can block our thinking and make us very defensive.

Exploring further, we find that our fantasies about living sustainably are very split between deprivation, anger and idealism. For some, the green life conjures an image of the frugal old aunt who shivers in winter because she won't turn her heating on and reuses everything. This speaks of deprivation and masochism as well as guilt and judgement. Allied with this are images of finger-wagging eco-missionaries, environmentalists who are seen to be full of anger and judgement. The flip side of this is the fantasy of living the good and virtuous green life, '*back* to nature' made out to be purer than pure. It is seen as an escape from 'real' life, a head-in-the-clouds hippie existence.

What's happened? If we look back into history there are at least three very different associations with the green movement, all of which are framed in a negative way. Firstly, in our recent history, the beginnings of the Nazi Party had a strong green ethos. This has left an indelible link in peoples' minds between the Green Party and extreme social control. Secondly, the 'back to nature' movement is seen as a longing for paradise, an unrealistic search for the Garden of Eden, often dismissed as unrealistic hippie nonsense, not part of

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mature, adult life. Thirdly, the green movement is linked with paganism, branded by our Christian culture as primitive, dangerous and seduced by bodily desire.

Fantasies about sustainable living which appeal to our imaginations are definitely there to be found, but they are lacking in the public arena.

Our fantasies about The Myth of Progress, however, are still heroic. How often do we hear: 'Oh well, technology will come up with an answer.' We believe that our civilization, with all its science and technology, is omnipotent and will get us out of any mess.

As a result of our 'progress', everything we use and buy is so disconnected from its source. It's so easy to turn a blind eye; the cheap shirt we buy maybe made by children in sweatshops or the neatly packaged chicken may well come from animals who have never stood up in their lives. It takes so much time and energy to make conscious choices. In fact, the very thing that is causing our crisis – overconsumption – has become our palliative, to soothe away our anxieties about the damage we are doing to the world. Some people liken this to the vicious circle of addiction (LaChance, 1991; Glendinning, 1994; Kanner and Gomes, 1995; Prentice, 2003).

Does that mean we have a bit of an eating problem? Well, yes, actually, we've trashed the family home and we've binged on all the reserves; oil and gas may well have peaked already, we overfish, clearcut forests and extract everything that can be sold for profit. Then we throw it up, undigested, into landfill sites.

How did this giant eating problem come about?

Many of you will have seen the series, 'Century of the Self' where Adam Curtis traces the rise of consumerism in the twentieth century (http://www.archive.org/details/AdaCurtisCenturyoftheSelf_0, accessed 8 August 2008). I will draw out just two of his points.

Linking products to our identities

Firstly, Curtis suggests, we have been deliberately manipulated into consuming by mass producers in pursuit of profit. This was done using the ideas of Freud, linking products to our deep desires through advertising; products then become part of our identities.

What happens, then, when we try to give up consuming? We might feel like we are less powerful or even that we are losing parts of ourselves. For example, a car is promoted as a symbol of sexual power and success. Gaining a car has become a rite of passage into adulthood in our society; giving it up can feel like a regression to adolescence, with a consequent loss of power.

Reducing our consumption is not just about a fear of losing power, it is also a fear of losing our individual freedom. There was a good example of this on 'Any Questions'. A woman in the audience asked:

> "Given that the UN environment programme has painted the bleakest picture yet for the wellbeing of our planet, why has nobody told me I can't drive my BMW turbo diesel?
>
> The government minister, Barbara Follett, gave a staggering reply: 'To tell you not to drive your BMW diesel is an infringement of your liberty and we're trying to leave you an element of choice here.' She then confessed to having one herself.
>
> On the panel was Jonathan Porrit, who concluded: Between the two of you I think we can broadly accept that the planet is stuffed". (BBC Radio 4, 27 October 2007)

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What we see here is a clash between individual and collective freedom gone mad, a clash between old and new stories. The old story, embedded within the Myth of Progress, prizes individual freedom very highly. We are taught that indigenous cultures have no sense of individual identity and that part of our long struggle towards Western modernity has been to realize ourselves as separate individuals. Our individual development is also seen in this light: part of the goal of growing up is to become separate from the maternal matrix in order to achieve adult maturity.

Many of the stories in our culture reflect this struggle; they are about young male heroes cutting their way out of webs. The end result of this bid for freedom is the dissolution of webs, where the kind of freedom that is achieved is more like an adolescent dream of escaping the parents. When webs dissolve, we see more and more people living and struggling alone – and now the very web of life is unravelling.

What of the new story? Quoting eco activist John Jordan: 'Until we are able to see the world as a seamless set of relationships, not objects but innumerable boundless subjects, we are not free' (http://www.utopias.eu/paths/ (accessed 19 July 2008)).

Individual freedom is an illusion. We are interdependent and interconnected. Our struggle for individual consciousness is always in relation to the rest of life; we are challenged to bear that tension between individual and collective.

As therapists, we know that in the process of long-term change there is often a period of time during which people are conscious of what they are doing, but cannot yet relinquish their familiar habit. Symptoms are often the last things to go, after the deep inner work has been done. The good news is that at least these two BMW drivers are thinking, which is more than they were doing a few years ago.

Consumerism as opiate of the people

Adam Curtis also claims that consumerism has been deliberately used as an opiate of the people. The US government was horrified by what had been unleashed during the First World War, the levels of human aggression. This coincided with Freud's claims that he had unearthed primitive sexual and aggressive forces that were the remnants of our animal past. Thus mass consumerism came into being as a deliberate policy of pacification, an attempt to satisfy people's desires, imagining this would make them docile.

Perhaps this is one story about how our giant eating problem was constructed. Yet again, it's a story about fighting nature, but this time it's about fighting the supposedly destructive wild animal within.

DESPAIR: WE'RE COMPLETELY FUCKED

So far I have been trying to show the different ways in which our culture defends against change. There's one last response that I have been hearing a lot lately that I think deserves a bit more attention. Many people are now waking up to the reality and fearing that it is completely hopeless, and this is the complete reverse of denial. This starts with a story from my practice.

Last year a client of mine, who came into therapy about relationships difficulties, revealed that she and her partner (both thirty somethings) spent their entire leisure time drinking

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and taking drugs. This was not a problem, she said; all her friends did likewise. We circled around this for a while. I was baffled as I could not find the real despair and anger underneath this wipe out. In the midst of a session, I threw in a wild card: 'What do you feel about the future?' she replied 'We're completely fucked.' She talked about our global crisis at length and she spontaneously made the link to her drinking, saying 'We may as well go down having a good time.'

Now there's a whole lot more I could say about where we went from there but the point is that this is an understandable response to the information we are receiving. Many people who have immersed themselves in the facts about what is happening in the world, admit to me in private that they see little chance of us getting through this, yet most of them are fearful of discussing this in public for fear of sounding too depressing or nihilistic.

What does it do to a whole generation of thirty somethings who are growing up with this secret view of their future? No wonder we have an epidemic of binge drinkers. Isn't it mind-blowing to imagine a collective who are secretly thinking this but not really sharing it, apart from just in passing – 'Oh – I think we're doomed'? It's very reminiscent of: 'Don't talk about the war.' We cannot deal with death in our culture.

If many people are secretly thinking this, and I suspect they are, their motivation for taking action in the face of climate change will be zero. As therapists, we know that when we face our worst fears, and *feel* the effects, we stand a chance of moving through darkness into enormous creativity. So let's face this response 'we're completely fucked'. What happens?

What would we do in response to a terminal diagnosis? We might be overwhelmed with many different feelings, and go through a difficult period of despair and depression. But such crisis can often wake us up in a radical way, and bring us back to the most important things in life. Things get simple: spend time with those you love, and in places you love. Sort out your unfinished business. People who have had brushes with death don't return wishing they had spent more time in the office. The heart takes over. In the words of Deep Ecologist Joanna Macy:

> Whatever happens, this can be a moment of unparalleled awakening. We have a sense of what it means for an individual to wake up. For the collective to awaken, we cannot even imagine what it will be like. The evolutionary pressure on us now, which can feel so ghastly, pushes us toward this awakening. Life-forms have gone through periods when it must have seemed totally hopeless. For example, when oxygen was a poison, who could have imagined that life would develop the breathing apparatus to use it?…I don't think we've been given any absolute guarantee that conscious life on Earth will continue. It might. It might not. In either case, this is a most extraordinary and beautiful moment. Because in this moment we can make a choice for loving life and taking care of each other. Right up to the end, we can make that choice, and that's glorious. So we don't need to ask, 'Will it go on forever?' (Macy J., 7 September 2005, www.joannamacy.net/html/letters.html, accessed 8 August 2008)

If we allow ourselves to feel, crisis opens an opportunity for awakening fully to the present. Then we take action for different reasons. We are no longer the heroes trying to save the world. We don't consume too much because it doesn't feel good *now*. We recycle and reuse because there is no 'away' to throw things. Living sustainably is simply about living with integrity now, not for some imaginary future. If ever we really thought we lose power in losing 'things' we find that living with integrity is where we find our power, success and liberation.

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Slowing right down, surrendering to despair and living through darkness without fighting it is a very different kind of hero myth – one that therapists know a great deal about. The pain of our despair connects us back into the world again, into our bodies; we rediscover compassion for ourselves and for others and then we *feel* the damage that we do. Going slow also brings great joy in the smallest details.

Whether we have a collective terminal diagnosis or not is actually beside the point. The 'we're completely fucked' response is yet another layer of the defence system, which gives us licence to give up thinking. The next thing that comes, as my client said, is 'Oh fuck it – I might as well drink.'

I have heard this so very many times over the years from women with eating problems, when they feel completely stuck and hopeless. There is an argument going on inside, which is old and seemingly unresolvable. There is intense build up of frustration. Suddenly, it is as if a switch goes off and the binge starts. There is a wipe out of thinking, as well as a longing to go beyond the small self, through an orgy of sensual pleasure, into oneness – a longing to fuck, to bring the parts of ourselves together in a meaningful way.

I suspect this mirrors what goes on in the collective. We conclude we are fucked, and there is nothing more that can be done. But when the collective gets stuck like this we have a wipe out that becomes an apocalypse.

What many people do not see is the range and scale of change going on in the world. The media seems focused on the bad news; it fails to see the many thousands of ways in which people are coming together in order to create change.

One of the most exciting initiatives I have come across is the Transition Town movement (www.transitionculture.org; www.transitiontowns.org), which began 15 months ago in Totnes, Devon. In a short space of time, this movement has spread to over 30 towns and cities in the UK, as well as to other countries around the world. (At the time of going to press there are now 78 towns in transition, with hundreds more that are thinking about it.)

Why has this movement become so popular? Because it engages people's imaginations, inviting them to envision a better future. In their words: 'a town using much less energy and resources could, if properly planned for and designed, be more resilient, more abundant and more pleasurable than the present' (http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/subj/ats/ontheedge2/workinginpublicseminars/profile_janeyHunt, accessed 19 July, 2008).

With this vision, each town (or any community of people) creates a workable plan towards making that future possible, using creative methods enabling groups to relate in a non-hierarchical way. It is rebuilding fragmented communities. Here is action for sustainable living that appeals to people's imaginations. The rapid spread shows how hungry people are for this change.

An extraordinary grass roots movement is growing, made up of thousands of initiatives such as this one. This is what happens when human beings start coming into line with their integrity. In a speech made at the Bioneers conference, in the USA in 2006, Paul Hawken says:

> This unnamed movement is the most diverse movement the world has ever seen… No one started this world view… There is no orthodoxy. It is global, classless, unquenchable and tireless. The shared understanding is arising spontaneously from different economic sectors, cultures, regions and corporates. It is growing and spreading worldwide with no exception. It has many roots but primarily the

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> origins are indigenous culture, the environment and social justice movements. . . . During the span of the 20th century, bid ideologies were worshipped like religion. . . . Capitalism, socialism, communism. . . . We were told that salvation would be found in the domination of a single system . . . (But) We know . . . as biologists . . . as community organisers . . . as ecologists (that salvation is) found in **diversity**. This movement is humanity's renewed response to resist and heal political disease, economic infection, and ecological corruption caused by ideologies.
> (http:www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1fiubmOqH4, accessed 6th September 2008)

THE INNER WORK OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Within all of these diverse movements, each one of us is challenged to do the inner work of collective change. Part of our task in this process is to change our relationship with the whole earth community. We know from so many other cultural shifts, such as apartheid or sexism, that it's a painful and humiliating process for the oppressor to give up their place 'on top' and take back their projections. The reward is that we find some of the missing pieces of ourselves, we discover what we had been longing for.

For example, when men project their vulnerability onto women, they become hardened, and they denigrate women who they see as 'soft' or 'weak'. They defend against taking it back, but when they do, they come back into being more human again.

So part of this process is about welcoming back our nature within: recognizing that we are domesticated wild animals and that our wild animal nature is not some lower being who is aggressive, or whose wildness is to be feared, or whose instincts and intuitions are not to be trusted . . . but rather *someone* to be respected, indeed, who makes us human. In many ways this is exactly what the project of psychotherapy has been about for the past 100 years, but I wonder how far we have really gone in respecting our bodily wisdom? Do we still see the symbolic as higher and the body as lower?

Working with women with eating problems I often hear the cries of those who are marooned in their heads. When I ask questions like: 'Do you feel hungry? Do you know the difference between physical and emotional hunger?' the answer in most cases is 'No – I feel cut off from the neck downwards.' They have been taught by our culture that bodies are not to be trusted. What a relief, then, to discover that the body can be trusted; that if we listen to our own nature, it will tell us when we are hungry and when we are full; it will also guide us to meet our emotional hunger. So simple! The difficult bit is undoing all those years of distrust and obliteration of bodily instincts and feelings, knowing which voice to trust and when.

Coming back into our instincts, intuition and sensation is reconnecting with an old part of ourselves that takes us back through evolution. Jung (1977, 57–8) suggests we have a two-million-year-old person within each of us and that the challenge for our times is to bear the tension between ancient and modern (Jung, 1961, 245–6). Who is this indigenous self? What does s/he have to say to us? What would it be like to spend a day in dialogue with that person?

We have ended up identifying with just a tiny part of ourselves in our heads, that bit which we say makes us uniquely human. 'Our bodies have become hairless shiny techno automatons, as far away from apes as possible' (Smelik, 2007).

Ironically, it is only when we can fully inhabit all of the diverse aspects of ourselves, can we realize our wisdom. Jeannette Armstrong describes the four capacities of humans as

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the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual selves – similar to Jung's concept of the self. Her quote at the very beginning describes something of our physical and emotional selves. She writes:

> 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…the other capacities fuse together in order to activate 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 existence. (Roszak et al., 1996, 322)

As we slowly come back down into our animal bodies, reclaiming our senses, intuition and instincts, we re-connect with our whole environment. It's our bodily senses that link us to the rest of life. We can feel what's happening to others through our bodies, as the hair rises on the back of our necks.

Deep Ecologist Arne Naess calls the process of moving beyond our human self, finding our *ecological identity*. How far can we extend this? It's easy to identify with pets, and with charismatic megafauna…polar bears, whales and dolphins. But how about slugs? The further we move beyond the human skin, to reclaim our vast self, the more we inhabit the Ecological Self (Naess, 1988, 20–1).

Crossing over this very sharp dividing line that we have made between humans and the rest of life is very taboo. Psychotherapist Harold Searles suggests that our relationship to the non human environment is 'one of the transcendentally important facts of human living' but that it is 'a source of ambivalent feelings to us' because of our fear of losing our identity as humans (Searles, 1960, 6).

Bonding with the rest of nature is as essential to us as bonding with other humans. EO Wilson calls it biophilia, our innate love for the rest of life. He writes:

> We are human in good part because of the particular way we affiliate with other organisms. They are the matrix in which the human mind originated and is permanently rooted, and they offer the challenge and freedom innately sought…(Wilson, 1984, 139)

Of course we *do* fall in love with place, land and creatures. How can we possibly *not* be connected, apart from in our minds? As Mary Oliver says in her poem, *Wild Geese* (Oliver, 1992, 110):

> Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
> are heading home again.
> Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
> the world offers itself to your imagination,
> calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-
> over and over announcing your place
> in the family of things.

In spending time in the wilds of nature, or just in our back gardens, we reconnect to the oneness of life. Jung describes this 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, 1961, 225).

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These experiences are profoundly healing. They are about dissolving and coming back together again, renewing ourselves in the process. We feel part of the larger living body of the universe. Quoting John Seed again, 'Indigenous cultures recognise that humans have a tendency to disconnect from the oneness of life, and the function of ritual is to reconnect us back into that sense of being part of a large whole' (personal communication).

Perhaps our binges on food, drink or drugs are a misplaced attempt to experience that ecstatic state of oneness, our consuming of the earth a misplaced longing to reunite with the earth.

Theologian Thomas Berry says that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects (Berry 1999). They all have needs and rights that must be taken account of in our decision making. They are 'stakeholders' too. How might we take them into account?

One example is a method called environmental constellations, developed by Zita Cox, which facilitates 'joined up' thinking by mapping the environmental system in front of our eyes, a tool that taps into unconscious process and thus enables a group to listen to the needs of the other-than-human world (see www.environmentalconstellations.com).

In all these ways, and many more, we are returning to the garden, not as some utopian paradise disconnected from real life, but as a living breathing other with whom we share our breath.

In the words of Arundhati Roy, 'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing' (Roy, 2003).

PART THREE: WHAT ABOUT THE CLIMATE *OF* THE COUCH?

On the one hand, the project of psychotherapy is very much in support of helping us retrieve lost pieces of ourselves. It brings us back down into our emotional bodies, it helps us to *relate* to self and other humans.

On the other hand, psychotherapy has grown up in an urban, Western culture and is inevitably shaped by it. Our development is supposedly shaped by human relationship alone, as Searles writes in 1960:

> The nonhuman environment…is…considered as irrelevant to human personality development…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, colour, and substance. (Searles, 1960, 3)

Perhaps this accounts for the difficulty that many therapists have in seeing the links between psychotherapy and our environmental crisis.

There is a burgeoning field of ecopsychology, wilderness therapy and ecotherapy, in the USA, Australia, and more recently in the UK, in which therapists of many backgrounds are articulating these very links (see, for instance, Roszak et al., 1996).

For example, a woman called Jenny Grut set up The Natural Growth Project within the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture here in London. She and other therapists worked with asylum seekers and refugees on allotments, using the metaphors of nature in the work of therapy while growing food. People who have suffered great loss and trauma can find great solace in making a safe connection with the natural world, while a more organic connection with humans can grow (Grut, 2002). I remember her saying to me that at the end

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of the day she could walk back past all the allotments and see the state of each person's psyche by looking at their plots.

But what of therapy in rooms? Do clients talk about these issues in our practice? If not, why not? If so, how do we work with it?

There are so many ways in which our lives are bound into the world beyond humans: What place can you call home? What of the land of your mother or father? What about special animals who were part of your childhood, or the love of a particular stretch of wild beach? Or a special relationship with rock or water? What of the grief for places, animals, trees that you may have lost? These are stories about love, awe and beauty, as well as of grief, rage pain for the losses in the wider world now.

Jungian analyst Jerome Bernstein describes how a patient in his thirties was talking about his struggles to get his life together, and stopped mid-sentence, with a long silence. Then he said:

> I feel a Great Grief. I feel it inside (points to his heart). It's never not there. It is never not far from me. In Montana I felt connected. (He had just returned from a trip there). Here I am disconnected – in my car, living on top of the land. I'm part of the land; that's my home. But I'm a product of my culture and therefore cut off from my home. I felt expanded there; I feel contracted here. When I was at the fathering in Montana, (a wilderness experience) I was part of a community.

Bernstein describes how

> the challenge in this instance is not to interpret at all – certainly not in the moment – to hold an experience that can feel between language, that can leave one with the tension of holding ones rational breath for far longer than any of us can imagine doing. To not seek the comfort of rational understanding, but to come to some kind of knowing through a holding and wonderment. (Bernstein, 2005, 73)

I find that as I become more aware of the links in myself, it is easier to make those links in session. Consider the following dream from a client of mine:

> She is standing in the middle of lush rainforest as termites destroy the trees. Finally, she is left alone, all the forest has been consumed and its inhabitants are extinct.

We spent most of the session following her associations which were linked to her eating problem and the emptiness behind her eating, reminding her of her many abandonments in childhood. On an internal level it was about an apocalyptic wipe out, you might say.

As I listened to this, I was aware of my own association to the clear-cutting of rainforests of the world. But my client made no mention of this and I was in two minds whether to raise it. Eventually I told her my association, at which point she said that I am 'bringing my green agenda into the room'. I felt angry with her comment and my irritation blocked me from finding a satisfactory response. Thinking she was not ready to talk about these issues, I left it.

This was some years ago now, before climate change had hit the headlines. With hindsight, I can see other ways through. What if I had made a comment that linked inner and outer realities, something like: 'I wonder if your dream is saying something about our collective desire to consume as if there was no tomorrow?' In this way, I am acknowledging that we are all caught in something together; eating problems are not simply an individual or familial experience.

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Kleinian analyst Hannah Segal writes about similar dilemmas regarding the danger of nuclear weapons during the 1980s. She writes:

> Even when patients do refer to nuclear issues, psychoanalysts remain faced with an ethical and technical dilemma. On the one hand…we must not collude with the patient's denial of any external situation that we may guess at from the material and that the patient does not bring out in the open.
>
> On the other hand, we must also be very wary of imposing on the patient our own preoccupations and convictions…If we do our job properly in dealing with the patient's basic defences, the relevant material will appear, because, in fact, below the surface, patients are anxious, even terrified. (Segal, 1988, 56)

This is a just a brief sketch of a complex area.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

We are in the midst of an extraordinary process of transformation, stuckness, defeat and the addictive numbing of despair coexist with a myriad of awakenings, of callings to speak out, of new visions and energies and creative possibilities arising all around the planet.

I have been trying to describe the journey towards sustainable living as a therapeutic journey, every bit as rich and deep as the personal therapy journeys we venture on. These inner and outer journeys mirror and inform one another; in the end we find that they are totally intertwined.

As the crisis quickens, the shadow of the myth of progress becomes ever more obvious. It is this that will push us to rediscover the Garden, whether this is by choice or whether we are pushed out of our comfort zones by the coming effects of our environmental crisis.

We do have a choice here. We may be living in the last hours of ancient sunlight. What are we going to do with our time? Busy ourselves shopping? Or spend time with those we love, in the places we love, and use the time to sort out our unfinished business with the earth?

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