

Dangerous Margins: Recovering the Stem Cells of the Psyche

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ABSTRACT *The dual problem addressed here is the increasing egocentric individualism in the Western world and the blind avoidance of facing the ecological crisis. This article uses ecosystemic thinking to explore the margins of our collective predicament. It posits a critical phase transition in the co-evolution of humans and the other-than-human world that constellates a rite of passage. While telling a story, it utilises story as both the conveyor of past constraints and the creative medium of transformation. This transformation entails loosening our attachment to conscious control and judgement and instead re-visioning problems as adaptations to an emergent paradigm including the need for self-regulation. The story entails an evolutionary trajectory that revisits our marginalised dangerous potency and challenges us to a reciprocal relationship with the other-than-human. It draws implications for both psychotherapeutic practice and for our responsibility to the ecosystems of our planet. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into the world, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story. (Thomas Berry)

Jason is a young man with a big heart that often gets him into untenable positions. He presents in therapy as a victim of his experience. It 'happens' to him and it's unfair. Gentle explorations of what his investment might be in maintaining this position fall on stony ground. He is attached to the unfairness. The therapeutic relationship falls into a precarious impasse. He wants me to confirm his position – and I want to give him permission to deconstruct it.

I could attempt to begin a different sort of conversation – one that is about where we are stuck: a meta-narrative that attempts to surface the underlying dynamic between us. Or I could shift out of a conscious dialogue by introducing imagination, body experience or metaphor/story, and engage Jason in a fresh manner that allows his unconscious a stronger place in the therapy. This would open the space for the story to take off in many different directions – not random, but certainly bringing in a chaotic complexity that takes account of what is presently unseen.

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It seems to me that ecopsychology may be in a similar impasse in attempting to engage the collective crisis facing humanity at this time. A conscious dialogue explaining the roots of our alienation and exhorting us to reconnect to our true interdependent state is unlikely to impact on our collective complex. By moving between the parallel process of therapeutic situation and the planetary crisis, between an imaginative story and an expositional one, I hope to show something of what an ecopsychological perspective can bring both to ecological concerns and to the consulting room.

Moving on an earlier kind of ecological activism, Arne Naess suggested a deeper analysis was necessary – a *deep ecology* that emphasised our intrinsic relational interdependence with all species.

Since then, several significant contributions have been made to this analysis including:

- the level of denial of planetary problems that follows a classic historical pattern; cf. Jared Diamond (2006);
- the abstraction and dissociation that takes place in the cultural shift from oral languages to the written word; cf. David Abram (1979) and Hugh Brody (2002);
- the alienation from our animal nature and illusory notions of control and mastery that come with the predictive capacities of our ego mind; cf. Jerome Bernstein (2005);
- the collusion between religion and Newtonian science that denigrates nature and permits the cruel desecration of sacred sites, other species and indigenous peoples; cf. Joanna Macy (2007).
- the narcissism of our present Western culture that sees ourselves as the pinnacle of planetary evolution (anthropocentric superiority towards other species) and through this cultural complex sees our human needs as paramount; cf. Arne Naess in Seed (1993);
- the consumptive greed and insatiable hunger that power our modern capitalist societies like an out-of-control eating disorder; cf. Mary-Jayne Rust (2008).

These are all insightful contributions and go some way towards an understanding of why humanity continues to persist in its self-destructive behaviour. Yet they all point towards what is wrong with humankind. While agreeing that there are many violent destructive behaviours that are dangerous to other species, the planet and ourselves, they may need to be understood in a different context.

When I shift the story just a little, to what *troubled* us rather than what is *wrong*, we get a different tone. If I am to talk about the pain I experience at the loss of species or the responsibility I feel towards indigenous cultures that have been decimated, this is a different communication – one that draws resonances to others through speaking from my experience.

To return to Jason: it would be tempting to proceed with an analysis of what is wrong. My training has enabled an ear for hearing this. Some of my language is already indicative of my clinical thinking. I have used the word ‘victim’. A shift to speak more personally from my experience will set a different tone – a warmer, more empathic quality will be present. This carries its own dangers – that of a collusive relationship in which challenges are avoided.

But what if I assume that what is happening with Jason is ‘not wrong’? What if it is exactly what needs to happen? What if I start to listen to his troubles from that open place and attempt to understand how he comes to be where he is?

And now, coming back to our eco-psychological perspective, how would this approach look? To move to a place of compassionate perspective for humanity's destructive, narcissistic, greedy and denigrating behaviour seems more difficult! It is rather like having a client who is admitting to abuse but not taking any responsibility. Something powerful gets stirred up – I could call it *righteous indignation* – and makes me want to confront him/her. This may be appropriate but it takes away the opportunity to be with the situation as it is: I am judging it again as 'wrong'.

A major part of the work of a systemic psychotherapist is to positively connote the complaint/symptom, in order to see how it works in the system, rather than focusing on the dysfunction. For instance, within a family system the therapist might positively connote a child's eating disorder as a means for the family to talk and stay together. This is not to absolve responsibility or to deny that our dissociation from our own instincts or alienation from the planet has brought us into a crisis. It has. Our collective denial is a defence against the anxiety of being aware of this crisis, just as trauma victims dissociate and split off their experience.

What we are working with is an *unconscious process* that is not susceptible to rational analysis or well-meaning actions. Searles pointed out that we seemed in the grip of a common apathy that he recognised as symptomatic of unconscious ego defences against anxiety.

The greatest danger lies in the fact that the world is in such a state as to evoke our very earliest anxieties and at the same time to offer the delusional 'promise', the actually deadly promise, of assuaging these anxieties, effacing them, by fully externalizing and reifying our most primitive conflicts that produce those anxieties. (Searles, 1979, p. 242)

Actions may help, once the unconscious complex has been worked with, so that it no longer has the client, or our collective culture, in its grip. The systemic work of understanding how the symptom or apparent disorder has its function within the overall system takes us into an empathic position, no longer being outside of the system judging it.

How to drop down and listen through to the dilemmas in this crisis? Sitting with clients, I notice how they want to draw me into their story – assimilate me to neutralise my otherness. If I can tune out of this known story, disengage my expectations and sink into sensing our mutual presence, my attention gets drawn to their unconscious complex. How might this work on a collective level? James Hillman gives us a pointer:

The world, because of its breakdown, is entering a new moment of consciousness: by drawing attention to itself by means of its symptoms, it is becoming aware of itself as a psychic reality. (Hillman, 1998, p. 97)

The world is drawing attention to itself by means of its symptoms. While there is the economic pressure towards globalisation, there is another complementary process away from individualistic egocentricity towards networked, interconnected communities that show deep concern for our wounded world. The world needs our engaged participation with it and its symptoms allow us a way to become aware of it as psychic reality.

This sort of eco-systemic thinking may help us in the much-needed creation of a new story: a story that attempts to see through to what might be unfolding in the crisis; a story that recognises the deep affinity between human flesh and the flesh of the world. Through our participatory engagement with the world we have co-evolved. David Abram writes:

Our nervous systems, then, are wholly informed by the particular gravity of this sphere, by the way the sun's light filters down through the Earth's atmosphere, and by the tug of Earth's moon. In a thoroughly palpable sense, we are born of this planet, our attentive bodies coevolved in rich and intimate rapport with other bodily forms – animals, plants, mountains, rivers – that compose the shifting flesh of this breathing world. (Abram, 2010a, p. 97)

Psychotherapy with its emphasis on the client's self-reflection or even with the dynamic between therapist and client can absent itself from this intimate co-evolution. One of Hillman's dictums is 'From mirror to window' (Hillman, 1989) – that if psychotherapists and clients spent less time looking in the mirror and more looking through the window, they might better attend to the world. He wants to break this mirror of self-reflection to free us from our self-absorption and release us back into the world. It is not *our* soul that individuates, it is the soul of the world.

Even this can become an anthropomorphic task. It is not just up to us to look out. It is not just for us to be aware of the world. *The world wants to look in.* The bird singing outside my window is asking to be heard. There is a potential reciprocal affinity through which the inside/outside distinctions no longer hold. The birdsong seems synchronistically attuned to the moment between the client and myself. The world is sensing us while we are sensing it. It is not a passive recipient of our attention but a deeply reciprocal partner. We are participants in the story that we are telling and is being told through us.

It is easy to recognise this reciprocity with animals. Neuroscience is increasingly showing the evidence of vicarious activity in mirror neurones. The more-than-human animals respond visibly to our attention. My dog is reading the subtle clues to my intentions. Sometimes he seems to know before I do what my intention is. When I engage my attention with a plant, the observable signs are less obvious. Plants are sensitive to their environment. Plant cells have features in common with nerve cells. They are not simply objects in our perceptual field but are joint participants within a shared field. Paul Shepard (1997) argues that our co-evolution with plants and animals has so deeply influenced our culture and thinking that they are inside of us as much as outside.

David Abram in a further challenge to our sense of being special, different from the rest of the planet, suggests:

It is even possible that this language we speak is the voice of the living Earth itself, singing through the human form. For the vitality, the coherence, and the diversity of the various languages we speak may well correspond to the vitality, coherence, and diversity of Earth's biosphere – not to any complexity of our species considered apart from that matrix. (Abram, 2010b)

Working with a training group, I notice a feeling of something missing from the field between us. My loose intention was to move into some practical work but this feeling draws my attention. It is always difficult to attend to what is missing; it is a resonance with something unspoken or not attended to. I name this and one member who has not previously contributed begins to speak. She feels rather out of the group, on the margins. Other participants encourage her to join in and fail to grasp that their well-meaning invitation is part of the problem as it feels like an implicit rule that says people need to be clear about their participation. As we stay with the difficulties, moving from thoughts to a sensing of what is present, other members begin to own their discomfort with her ambivalence and this

creates the space to recognise how she carries shadow ambivalences for this 'open, accepting group'. Perhaps the group was in the grip of the psychological construct of needing a sealed vessel to enable transformation – those not truly in the flask are marginalised.

Some persons seem prone to be shadow carriers or have a habit of occupying margins but, if they are not to be scapegoats, the members of a system need to be permeable to what is expressing itself through them rather than what they think they are expressing. The tension between the marginal participant and the one wanting to be inclusive can be seen as tension between different aspects of the one group – expressing itself through its members.

This shift of perspective may be critical for psychotherapy. Instead of reading the field as one that comes from the individuals – an *interactive field* – we could see it as emerging through the individuals – a *synergetic field*. The synergy comes because the relationship between members seems pre-attuned. It emerges through them but is not created by them. The individual is not at the centre but is embedded in a reciprocal relationship with other members.

The shift in how we see the nature of transformation puts inner fulfilment into a secondary relationship. It is an affect of a wider transformation, not a cause. Jung said that we are in the psyche; the psyche is not in us. This reminds me of Jung's dream in which he sees a yogi who, much to Jung's surprise, had his face. Jung awoke thinking, 'Aha, so he is the one who is meditating me. He has a dream, and I am it' (Jung, 1989, p. 323). And, remarkably similarly, Tweedledee asks Alice where she would be if the Red King left off dreaming about her. She was, after all, 'only a sort of thing in his dream!' (Carroll, 2007, p. 375).

A friend brings a dream that connects with the article even as I write.

She is in the kitchen looking out into the garden and notices with surprise what looks like a baby orangutan. Puzzled but charmed she goes out to investigate and is disconcerted to see that this is a human baby but one covered with an unusual amount of hair. Her whole attitude shifts from warm curiosity to anxious concern. How did this strange baby get into her garden? What should she do about it?

Just then she notices a group at the back of the garden – adults and children who are also hairy and wild looking. Her husband arrives at this point and asks, 'What's going on here?' Then on seeing a large amount of excrement on the side of the garden, he asks an adult, 'Is this your children's?' The man rolls across the garden into the excrement and proceeds to smell and taste it. 'Yes, definitely ours,' he says.

On hearing this dream, I remembered a comment about the poverty of political discourse since the invention of the flush toilet. The shit was no longer faced: it all got flushed away. In contrast, part of the dreamer takes ownership... and more! The dream offers a possible hint to our sanitised culture in which our immune system is increasingly mistrusted to build its own defences.

There are many ways to engage this dream. We could do more about the nature of what we each have in our 'garden'. We could explore what we have lost in our sweet-smelling culture of the ability to recognise kinship through smell. What stands out to me is the paradox of the baby – an image of potential combined with animal hair: a future primitive.

One thread of evolutionary theory suggests that evolution proceeds through the young of the species not specialising in the manner of the mature adult but staying flexibly adaptable to new evolutionary niches. This *neoteny* is very apparent in dogs that retain many infant characteristics, which give them the evolutionary advantage to read humans accurately.

Yet this baby human is covered in hair. Again the humour of the dream comes through. Are we being teased for being the only primate that is not born hairy? Or might the fine foetal hair, called 'lanugo', which covers the six-month-old foetus in the womb and is usually shed before birth, be something that stays in the neoteny of the future ... as if we might be reclaiming some of our primate nature in this evolutionary adventure?

Coming back from this speculation to my fictional client, Jason, I am thinking how his feeling of being at the effect of others (victim-like) may have served him. In many ways it keeps him young. He feels like he is in a world of adults who have greater powers than he feels himself to have. I could suggest that he grows up and claims his adult status – a bit like exhorting Western society to stop being so immature. Instead we start to explore his experience of 'unfairness'. This leads to a sense of his not feeling at home in his family and a wider sense of estrangement in life. He does, however, have a powerful connection with horses.

This feeling of estrangement from human culture but affinity with animals is not uncommon. Jerome Bernstein explores this pattern in *Living in the Borderland* (Bernstein, 2005). He describes the emergence of the 'Borderland' as an experience of reality beyond the rational – a psychic space where the overly rational Western ego is in the process of reconnecting with its split-off roots in nature. His clients reported particular sensitivities to the sufferings of animals that he learnt to take at face value rather than as images of their internal world. He began to recognise this sensitivity as coming from a deep connection to the earth and possible evolutionary transformation. He thinks that new psychic forms are attempting to emerge and, while being resisted by the Western ego in general, have impacted on this group of sensitised individuals.

And after all, *we may be at a juncture in evolutionary history for which there is no precedent.*

We have moved out of nature's capacity to regulate us. Unlike other species, we have the powers to overcome environmental constraints, such as the limits of available food. The dangers are that this could lead us to extinction – but the corollary is that we may learn the lessons of self-regulation, rather than having nature correct our behaviour through environmental constraints.

Self-regulation is not that easy for us as individuals: it is far from a given for our species. From the epidemic of obesity in the West, to the 20 million tons of food thrown away in the UK alone, our lack of self-regulation is clear. A quick look at the recent banking crises, driven by short-term profit and precipitated by greed, shows the failures of banks' ability to self-regulate. And the horror of these events may be part of the painful process of facing into our collective denial.

Starting to self-regulate is a functional mutation that could take place at our present evolutionary threshold. While the evidence for it is small at present, this is not a basis for prediction. At junction points and thresholds, normal laws fail to operate. We enter a liminal space where the old means of regulation do not work but we have not yet developed new ones. These 'borderlands' lie, like their territorial counterparts, at an in-between reality that is not governed either by what has come before or what is attempting to manifest. They are intrinsically uncertain places to be in which small changes can be amplified.

They are described by anthropologist Turner as *liminality* (Turner, 1987), and by Winnicott as *transitional space* (Winnicott, 1953). While being chaotic in nature, they are a source of

creative potency. Winnicott considered such transitional spaces to be the location of cultural transformation. Psychotherapy has long explored events that constellate at boundaries or transitional spaces, starting with sacred dreams that took place in Greek temples. The mysterious, chaotic nature of these thresholds has a dream quality and requires us to move into an imaginative mode, attending as if from peripheral vision or unexpected whispers from another reality.

Jason may be one of these disaffected but attuned individuals who suffer not so much from a personal trauma but a collective one. Attempting to understand his troubles solely from the viewpoint of his personal history is another form of reductionism. Although he had troubles in his childhood that may have sensitised him, his primary anxiety is not personal but rather that of our human collective attempting a radical evolutionary jump – one that seems to threaten our precious, if not precarious, sense of self. His staying young in his felt sense can be read as an adaptive psychological mutation. He needed to divorce himself from the matrix of adult human culture sufficiently not to specialise in the same way: not to fall into the destructive paradigm that controls our culture; ironically to differentiate sufficiently not be party to the separation of the ego. And like many shamanic practitioners, he needs allies in this challenge: animals that are catalysts to recover his instincts and reclaim a reciprocal affinity with the world; animals that mirror his own wounded animal and as kindred spirits offer healing and the development of compassionate concern.

As a relational psychotherapist, I am becoming increasingly mindful of our companions on earth. I feel their attention on me as I practise. When I explore the client's relational background I include inquiry about his/her relationship with other species. Jason's deep resonance with the magic of the horse was what kept his soul alive in what seemed like a desecrated world to the sensitive child he was. Telling me stories about his relation to horses brought their magic into the room. These wondrous beings became our companions through his work. They seemed to hold a combination of grounded instinct and magical fantasy, of wild strength and feminine intuition that he sought to find in himself. They offered an alternative to the domestication to which he felt he had to submit.

In this deeper sense he had felt himself a victim to collective forces – powers over which he had no apparent say – and without the 'horsepower', he might have succumbed to despair. Through participating in telling stories he began to retell his own story. We moved from stories about his past to imaginative stories co-created between us that reflected his present dilemma. In one such story, he removes the saddle of his favourite horse and attempts to ride bareback. The excitement of direct contact with the horse overcomes his fear of loss of control and he proceeds to gallop crazily away. Just when he is feeling intoxicated by this new power, the horse suddenly halts and he is thrown to the ground.

This story did not need much unpacking for him. It also offers us an interesting parallel of the potency and dangers of working in this borderland territory. They do offer powerful imaginal means of retelling our story so that we are future-orientated rather than caught in past agendas. The dangers come when our egos become inflated from the transpersonal energies available at thresholds. To handle the power of wildness, we need not only practice with riding the waves of chaos but also humility. We need the holding of a relational field in which we recognise our interdependency, whether this is a therapeutic relationship, a working group, a community or our resonance with the more-than-human world.

Part of our present difficulty comes because our dissociated ego feels our survival threatened at just these junctions where transformation could occur. During a workshop, a participant reported the following:

During an exercise on the course I had a scary, yet profound, experience in which I found myself staring into a mirror, watching how my face rapidly rotted away until there was nothing left over my collar. I remember noticing that even if there was nothing there I still could see my shirt and the colour of my tie. This comforted me in a strange way, as it made me realise that there was still some life left in me. When we discussed my experience afterwards I realised that I had witnessed a spectacular shift within me. What was rotting away was my professional façade, or my professional face. (Wolde, personal communication 2008)

Such experiences of ego loss within a holding environment are necessary precursors to coming through a collective transition. The 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan have shown us the challenge for survivors to orientate themselves in a world that their minds cannot recognise. Given the anxiety generated by the uncertainty of transitional spaces, how can we hold and feel held enough to use the hot energy creatively?

Chaos theory offers us the intriguing notion of *strange attractors* that operate within a chaotic system to constrain possible fluctuations. This metaphor shows how an apparently unordered system has recourse to patterns that are not readily recognisable but have a hidden order. This is helpful in understanding phase transitions, which are inherently unpredictable and chaotic, such as when water boils or freezes.

Transferring, with caution, this metaphor of attractors to ecosystems, it allows for the possibility of deep connections within the collective unconscious. The difficulties or dysfunction of a system are not just something that is wrong and need correcting. They are strong indicators of underlying tensions and unresolved issues within a culture that form constituent parts of its unique history. This unique history has its own evolving trajectory or entelechy which seldom reveals itself in linear or predictable fashions but creates an attractor field the influences the emerging direction.

It is *as if* the ecological unconscious is dreaming us into a collective rite of passage. We are at this threshold needing not only to let go *of* our present anthropomorphic assumptions about our place on earth but also to let go *to* a sensed but unknown transformation. This transformation is not something we can understand consciously or be in control of. It is an emergent probability that is attempting to evolve through us. While predicting what will come is not possible, we can be sure enough it will come from the margins.

Recent events in the Middle East, and in Egypt in particular, show how there can be profound transformations that are completely unexpected: unexpected because they come from the margins – in this case from the marginalised youth, who both shaped and were shaped by this collective ferment. The power of this ferment does not come from rational choice but from emotions. The other side of our fear of wild other-than-human is our passion and longing for them.

The dangerous potency which we banish to the margins of our tame, safe society and project onto the wild other-than-human is the same energy that that we unconsciously act out in the destruction of our environment. This is the potency from which we dissociate in order to be ‘civilised’ and which we will need to salvage if we are to negotiate our rite of passage – a

passage through shadow lands that harbour the potential held in the penumbra of our consciousness. This potential in the shadow is like the *stem cells of the psyche* that could catalyse the regeneration of our collective story.

END REFLECTIONS

Like all stories, this one has focused on some aspects of a bigger story and excluded others. While talking about shadow lands, I have created a few. These potent absences include our *collective narcissism*, our *need for reparation for our destructive behaviour*; for *physical embodiment*; for the *vitality of play* and *social justice*. While not denying responsibility for these exclusions, this particular story wanted to have the shape that it has drawing on the emergent coincidences, such as the friend's dream, that drew my attention. It seemed to particularly emphasise the elemental power that modern civilisation has disowned, concreted over and now desperately needs to recover before it draws us into an ecocidal catastrophe.

I hope to have shown that a story emphasising conscious choice, whether therapeutic or ecological, is very limited in its ability to transform an unconscious complex. Using various therapeutic approaches as examples of working with unconscious processes, I have explored how we can shift the story by listening through to the rejected margins of the collective; to the whispered not-yet-felt/thought emerging; to the regenerative potential of the wild psyche. While *stems cells of the psyche* is clearly a metaphor, I believe it is more than a metaphor of what gives future generations hope. Just as stem cells orchestrate regeneration in the physical organs, generative relationships transform how others perceive the world and act in it.

The Jason in you, or me, may still feel himself a marginal character but he has become engaged with his own story rather than being only an actor in it. The very nature of his complaints, his failings have become the ingredients of his sense of connection with the more-than human and a consequent sense of being held. This re-visioning of personal story to give a place to the 'inferior' margins of the psyche parallels the collective challenge. In his powerful poem, 'Last Night', Antonio Machado (1983), dreams of a beehive inside his heart where golden bees were making sweet honey from his old failures. It is indeed a sweet thought that it will not be my/your heroic achievements but our acknowledged failures through which the compassionate honey will come.

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