

NATURE 'R US

Connect – Love – Do

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Introduction

As I contemplate the triune vision/mission of The Great Turning Gathering – to bring about an environmentally sustainable, socially just, spiritually fulfilled human presence on the planet – I see that the “binding ingredient” is our connection with nature.

Many people believe that we got off track a few hundred years ago at the time of the Scientific Revolution, in which humanity’s relationship with nature shifted from knowing that we are inseparable from nature, to seeing nature as something to use, control and dominate. In my work as a counselor/therapist, most of the clients I see experience themselves as separate, isolated and alone and believe their lives do not make a difference. They suffer profoundly, even if their outer circumstances are “good” by Western standards. This existential pain and despair gives rise to a myriad of symptoms – addictions, of some sort, being primary.

Anne Wilson Schaefer wrote a book entitled, When Society Becomes an Addict. Her contention is that addictions are the result of looking outside of ourselves to fill an inner void. In other words, we can never get enough of what we don’t really need. The environmental and societal problems we see in the world today are the global symptoms of our profound disconnection with who we really are.

A consciousness shift is occurring now, bringing us back to the recognition that ***we are nature/nature is us***. In psychology and spirituality, new fields of study and practice have emerged, called Ecopsychology, Ecospirituality, and Ecotheology. They are dedicated to re-connecting human consciousness and functioning with the natural world and with the cosmos. The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton wrote: **“Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation out of which no one can make anything or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich, full of inexhaustible interest, opening out into infinite further possibilities for study and contemplation and interest and praise. . .”**

When we know ourselves as connected in this way, our human identity shifts. Who we are *is* connected with all that is. We are not alone. We are part of the world, not separate from it. What we think, feel and do makes a difference. The experiential knowledge of this is the source of health, psychologically and spiritually. It shapes our behaviour and actions.

Re-connecting to Nature

In his book Beauty – The Invisible Embrace, John O’Donohue wrote so beautifully of the effect our connection with nature has on us:

“ . . . Blaise Pascal said: In difficult times you should always carry something beautiful in your mind . . . [the poet] Rilke said that during such times we should endeavour to stay close to one simple thing in nature. When the mind is festering with trouble or the heart torn, we can find healing among the silence of mountains or fields, or listen to the simple, steadying rhythm of waves. The slowness and the stillness gradually take us over. Our breathing deepens and our hearts calm and our hungers relent . . . The world

cannot ruffle the dignity of a soul that dwells in its own tranquility. Gradually, this serenity will begin to pervade our seeing and change the way we look at things.”

In Ecopsychology retreats, we lead participants in outdoor exercises in which they focus on experiencing the natural world through their 5 senses. It takes awhile to slow our bodies down to begin to see, hear and feel what is around us. As that occurs, people later report feeling a sense of aliveness and gratitude for the beauty and wonder of the natural world. A next step, is then to imagine that the Earth, as a sentient being, also feels us. This exercise is a profound one that begins to blur the boundaries of our perception of being separate, and opens us to experience our interconnection with the life around us. Where do we leave off and the world begins?

As we breathe in, we take in the oxygen of the atmosphere and expel carbon dioxide in an ever-widening circle of receiving and giving. Our bodies are made up primarily of water, derived from the element of water. We draw into our bodies/bones/blood through the food we eat, the elements of the earth. And our bodies and spirits are fueled by the fire/energy of the Sun that runs the cellular engines of our bodies and sparks the imagination of our minds. What part of us is not natural?

I do not believe that it will ever be enough to just “do” the right thing. Taking the time to reflect and experience who we are **as** nature is an essential practice to help ground us in the knowledge that what we do to nature, we do to ourselves.

Nature Deficit Disorder in Children

Author Richard Louv, wrote Last Child in the Woods – Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder. He says that in North America, we are participating in an experiment with our own children. In the U.S., 80% of the population live in urban and suburban areas, and the statistics are probably not a lot different in Canada. This is the first generation of children who are living lives quite disconnected from nature. Nature is more abstraction than a lived experience. Children’s lives are becoming more structured and less connected to experiencing the world through their senses and imagination. The natural world has become a stranger to children, and often something to fear.

Louv cites some research that makes a link between autism and nature-deficit disorder. In my work as a counselor, it is common for my adult clients to recall a time spent in nature that was beautiful, awe-inspiring, comforting, peaceful, connecting. When they recall these experiences in as much detail as possible through their imagination, they often are able to feel the emotions in their body as though they were there. This often becomes a positive resource that they can use to help calm and soothe themselves. I sometimes wonder what resources this current generation will draw upon without these experiences.

Children are also being taught about environmental degradation in the schools, but without the direct experience of the joy, play, adventure and wonder of being in the natural world. Is nature becoming a source of fear and guilt for children. We may be teaching our children to recycle, etc., but is it grounded in love and joy? What are the long-term consequences of this experience of disconnection for this and future generations?

Everything at the Mall comes from nature

In a training session with Ecophilosopher, Joanna Macy, we trainees spent most of the day in silence in the redwood forest that surrounded the retreat centre where we were staying. It

was a beautiful, warm day in August and the trees filled me with such gratitude to be alive and to be able to have this wonderful time among them. Then, at 3:00, we were to meet in the parking lot and drive to a nearby shopping mall, continuing in silence. Our instructions were to wander through the mall with the awareness that everything in the mall is made from materials extracted from the Earth. I remember that the first thing I saw as I entered the mall was a kiosk with plastic cell-phone covers in a vast array of colours. I thought – we are waging war for the oil needed to make these plastic items. Later, I walked past the window of a jewelry store and thought about the amputated limbs of children in Sierra Leone –victims of the diamond mining industry there. In a Macy’s store, I read the labels on clothing, that we can buy for very little money, and wondered about the working conditions for those who made these. Someone counted 40 different countries represented on those labels.

It was an incredibly powerful exercise to connect us with the reality that all the things we use, purchase and consume are derived from something and someone in our world. We are radically interconnected and our actions have a huge impact.

Loving Nature as the basis of our Doing

Fr. Thomas Berry, wrote in the Forward of a beautiful book of Thomas Merton’s writings on nature, called When the Trees Say Nothing, the following:

“An absence of a sense of the sacred is the basic flaw in many of our efforts at ecologically or environmentally adjusting our human presence to the natural world. It has been said, ‘We will not save what we do not love.’ It is also true that we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred.”

The primary theme here is connection - connection through our bodies, minds and hearts. Making connection is a conscious and intentional process, because our current crisis has been steeped in a paradigm of disconnection. One way to choose to shift our own consciousness and deepen the felt knowing of our interconnectedness with all of life, is through our connection and love of nature.

Last spring, I went to hear Joanna Macy speak at the Whidby Institute. She was co-presenting with Bill Plotkin – a psychologist who leads people in vision quests and wilderness experiences as a means to psychological and spiritual healing and renewal. At the end of the talk, I asked them what would be the single most significant action that we could be taking for the Great Turning. They both responded that “Gratitude” was it – to regularly ground yourself in an experience of profound gratitude for the gift of life, for the beauty that is here, for the joy of being alive at this time.

Resources

The Voice of the Earth – Theodore Roszak (considered the “father” of ecopsychology)

Ecopsychology – Restoring the Earth/Healing the Mind – ed. By Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes and Allen D. Kanner

We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World is Getting Worse – James Hillman and Michael Ventura

Nature and the Human Soul – Bill Plotkin

Coming Back to Life – Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown

Last Child in the Woods – Richard Louv

<http://www.ecopsychology.org/>

<http://www.ecopsych.com/>

<http://ecopsychology.athabasca.ca/>

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(I will be starting a monthly Ecopsychology workshop)