

Reflective Journal: Exploring my connection to place as “an ecological self”

Introduction

Module 2 of the MA Ecology and Spirituality proposes an exploration of the notion of “the ecological self”, and as I wrote my reflections in my journal during the month of February 2018, one important aspect of this was the revelation of how my own sense of the importance of being truly connected to the place where I am has developed.

After a professional life-time (40 years) working as a humanitarian and living in many places across the globe, I now feel drawn to return to the island of my birth to take up residency, and seek new and meaningful ways of caring for people, places and planet.

Methodology: Presence to what is!

I propose to frame this reflection and exploration of my connection to a particular place on this planet using the three phases that ecologist Stephan Harding presents in *What is Deep Ecology?* - his appreciation of the work of Arne Naess who developed the notion of deep ecology (as opposed to “shallow ecology”): deep experience, deep questioning and deep commitment. This includes examples of poems that have emerged as I advanced through the module.

The phrase “Presence to what is!” emerged as my “ultimate norm” from a deep questioning exercise in February as the class considered the work of Naess, based around his “apron, diagram” as presented by Harding (op.cit.). Harding describes this as a statement that “encapsulates our deepest intuitions about life based on deep experiences of wide identification.” This work of Naess has been a most important contribution to the field of ecology – including to the core sense of the MA Ecology and Spirituality programme. It has become a reference point and recurring confirmation of my commitment to exploring what “an ecological self” means to me, and how a sense of being part of a particular place on this planet is revelatory of many new understandings.

A particular place

The place where I find myself in this reflection is Dartington, in the heart of South-East Devon. The main Dartington Estate is where almost a century ago, the Elmhirst family rebuilt formerly neglected and crumbling spaces, and brought to life a vision of how people could live together, with decent livelihoods, pursue learning and creative pastimes, in deep respect for each other, all beings, place and planet. And for the past few decades, it has been the home of Schumacher College.

This is not a Utopia, as there are many challenges to pursuing the vision and legacy of the Elmhirsts, but it is where, after almost a decade of visiting this place, getting acquainted with its inhabitants in many different ways, I sense that there is some kind of “strange attractor” that is calling me to come here again and again... Indeed, it is becoming clear that somehow I have a sense of being “chosen” as a collaborator, of being called to listen, and to be present to what is...

Deep experience – cracking the shell

The first signal I had that this land might be speaking to me was when I found myself alone in a sunken garden, at the end of a short course at Schumacher College in May 2011, writing down words that emerged to form a short poem:

Remembering to be

*I came to learn, to listen, to see
And here I've simply remembered to be
Attentive and mindful, curious and free
Joining with nature on bended knee
Brings forth my reverence, nurturing me
To go forth in gladness, smiling once more
To think that soon I'll return to this door...
I came to learn, to listen, to see
And here, I've simply remembered to be.*

(May 2011)

While I have always appreciated the time I have spent in the stimulating and beautiful environment of the Dartington Estate, I'd never thought about what being here, in this particular place, really meant to me – at least not consciously. And I had no idea where these words came from.

But as the light began to stretch the cycles of winter days in February 2018, after initial exchanges in January, I found myself “communing” more and more with the natural surroundings of the College; and verses, like birdsong, have continued to emerge to evoke my delight and wonder:

*Spring is born
Snowdrops arise
Slender and delicate
Reaching for the skies*

*The cold, wet Earth
Accompanies their entry
The atmosphere watches
The arrival of a sentry*

*To herald the new
The known, yet untold
The snowdrops seem fragile
Yet visibly bold.*

*As all who know Winter
Will rest and repose
So life can reflourish
And everyone grows*

*The cycles of seasons
Come round, so we see
That Earth lives to nurture
Just helping us be*

*Again and again
There's no need to doubt
That Spring will arise
And call us all out.*

(February 2018)

So I sensed that I had tuned into something much greater than my own mind and ego. In a small, modest way, this was like Aldo Leopold's encounter with the “fierce green fire dying in the wolf's eyes” – an experience that remains etched in my consciousness as a crack in the wall of the illusions for much of my lifetime that I was alone; a one-woman-show; deeply motivated to do what I could to “save the world” as a dedicated humanitarian

worker; while struggling to be a responsible adult “super-mum” for my two precious children... exhausting and far from natural!

Despite years of “inner work” and “self-development”, even the profound “turning point” experience in one of Joanna Macy’s workshops, when I grieved the loss of so much biodiversity and precious aspects of the planetary life I had so far taken for granted, did not yet give me the sense that Nature might actually be speaking to me. I knew I needed some deeper meaning to make sense of life’s growing crises, but I was still – as quoted by Donna Haraway with reference to sci-fi author Kim Stanley Robinson’s vision in *2312* of a period in which humanity fails to act in order to avert catastrophic climate change – in “the Dithering”.

However, while I observed with deep dismay the reports about the effects of climate change and what gender and climate justice activist Greta Gaard describes as “the overconsumption of earth’s other inhabitants – plants, animals, ecosystems”, hastening the crumbling of both “civilization” and natural life on a vast scale, I sensed that a “naming, blaming or shaming” approach was not helpful to me or others in bringing any significant transformation. As Harding points out: “the experience (of Aldo Leopold) was not looked for, expected or contrived. It happened spontaneously.”

So the spontaneous emergence of a new form of collaborative awareness through the gift of poetry was very new to my individualistic sense of self. But the place found further subtle ways to talk to my psyche; and many more “unusual” experiences that followed have helped reveal and heal the painful, but necessary, cracking apart of the shell of my anthropocentric worldviews, and old illusions of separation and self-sufficiency. These included a deep moment of “understanding” with a tall tree in the redwoods behind the College during a Goethean Science exercise; and an exhilarating, if somewhat uncanny, encounter with a raven at one of the Tors on Dartmoor during a Terrapsychology course taught in February 2013 by ecopsychologist , Craig Chalquist.

And in the course of February 2018, such exchanges have become an almost daily occurrence, as I walk in these beautiful natural surroundings, seeking guidance to understand why I am here and how I can be of service.

Thread of life

*Threading my way
Through each day
I stumble and fall
Yet doubt not at all
My path on this soil
In this time that is mine
Is to be here and now
Net-weaving, I bow
To the stories of life*

*In peace or in strife
As I follow this path
I weep and I laugh.*

Deep questioning – finding the right ones to ask

So how, I ask my environment in my daily reflections, can this new “ecosophical” sense of interconnection help us move beyond superficial efforts to “green” current western attempts to address the problems of climate change? How to pierce the divisive and exploitative nature of socio-economic ideologies that remain rooted in cultural beliefs that “justify” domination of more vulnerable beings, notably women and minority groups, in particular those related to gender and sexual orientation? And how to challenge the predominance of techno-scientific reasoning that maintains such powerful barriers to shifting our paradigm thinking about the contemporary crises facing people, places and planet?

The obvious correlations between the environmental and feminist movements have led many writers to advocate the uniting of efforts in an “eco-literate” approach to ensure the inclusion of all vulnerable beings – sentient or non-sentient - who are suffering or at risk of oppression or abuse. Greta Gaard offers both a broad and in-depth analysis of her assertion that “to have authentic, inclusive feminism, gender justice and sexual justice must be partnered with climate justice, for women of all genders and sexualities form the grassroots force within these three movements.”(op cit. p.14).

Indeed, these massive contemporary concerns need to be addressed at all levels: global, regional, local and personal. But frequently – well honestly, most of the time – these issues seem just too enormous for me as an individual to deal with... I can feel them deeply as I read or listen to eloquent speakers, and I long to find my own form of right action, but much of the time my ability to be involved in activism remains abstract and theoretical. So how can I contribute to upholding this need for ecological justice for all in my daily life, in my corner of the planet?

Ecology is spirituality

*My inspiration, my breath of life
Has moved in me,
Expanding and contracting
Flowing and ebbing...*

*All this I knew in Mother's womb
All this I lost, when words of doom, of gloom
Constrained my spirit, suppressed my soul*

Of all that was alive, and precious and whole...

*Till one day, a path through the dark, heavy wood
Drew me in to remember, to retrieve that sense of good
Inherent in each being, just waiting to emerge
Through oneness with nature, and openness to serve.*

Deep Commitment – a path of homecoming

In exploring the notion of deep commitment, Harding comments (op.cit.): “When an ecological world view is well developed, people act from their whole personality, giving rise to tremendous energy and commitment.” For any commitment to engaging in ecological action to be authentic and sustainable, it must surely emerge from the conviction of universal interconnectedness, and notably a sense of belonging to the place where one is.

In my case, this is manifesting as a sense of “entanglement” with more and more natural elements as well as people, in and around Dartington. So rather than writing “about” my encounters, it seems that when I simply sit down and listen, the place itself communicates what is needed for me to learn to collaborate more deeply and live in fuller relationship together – just being ourselves. It is surely this growing awareness that has helped formulate my sense of commitment as N.1 “Presence to what is!”

As Karen J. Warren observes: “Humans are who we are in large part by virtue of the historical and social contexts and the relationships we are in, including our relationships with nonhuman nature... Relationships of humans to the nonhuman environment are, in part, constitutive of what it is to be human.”

It is early days in this new relationship, but the messages of the voices of this land are becoming clearer and clearer.

Towards an ecological self?

*To embrace the space, and be of this world
You must seek out sources - yourself, not in courses...*

*To join with Nature
Just walk in rapture,
Opening your heart
Lets in my subtle art.*

*To reconnect with your lineage
Renounce your need for image
Instead, to grow
Let intuition flow*

*Then, open to my spaces,
Let me show you new places
Where your senses will dissolve
Your need to find, resolve.*

*Entangled, in deeper knowing, our souls and forms are flowing
With promise of "other seeing" - of space to enliven being.*

(February 2018)

Craig Chalquist, who taught the aforementioned course on *Terrapsychology: Re-engaging the Soul of Place* at Schumacher College five years ago, called this process of conscious homecoming: "heartsteading". And words he shared then sum up my experience to date rather well:

"As some conduct a bold search for signs of extraterrestrial aliens overhead, heartsteading re-engages with the alienated terrestrial reaching up from underfoot."

So at the end of February 2018, I feel myself on a path of homecoming. It is a sense of truly taking to heart a unique invitation to explore how my own life history and personal myths, and my new adventures in seeking to understand what being an ecological self might be, meet the story of the Dartington Estate: it could be another place, but not another planet...

Earth, what do I learn of you?

*You are my cradle of Life and of Death
You know my longing for movement, and cycles of birth
You hear my pain and fear of loneliness
You succour my groundlessness
And you give me warmth, colour and texture, to feel myself alive
When all around is cold and wasted, I search for your warm hand.*

(March 2018)

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