

Towards
an
Ecopsychotherapy



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Mary-Jayne Rust

**Towards
an
Ecopsychotherapy**

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INTRODUCTION

Ecopsychotherapy is a relatively new form of psychotherapy which understands that human relationships exist within the larger context of life on earth. The web of life is not just a collection of beings but more like a continuum of earth–water–sky–tree–air–creatures–sun–human. Trauma arises when relationships within that continuum are disrupted; healing ourselves cannot be done in isolation. Psychotherapy invites us to tell the story of our human relationships; ecopsychotherapy expands this to include our earth story, the context or continuum in which our human relationships sit.

Ecopsychotherapy is just one of many ecotherapies which arise out of the field of ecopsychology, the inquiry into our human relationship with the rest of nature. Ecopsychotherapy is a form of ecotherapy which also pays attention to the inner world as well as to the therapist–client relationship. Being aware of power hierarchies within the therapy world I want to stress that this does not make ecopsychotherapy better than other forms of ecotherapy but simply offers

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a different approach that certain clients may benefit from. My chosen title *Towards an Ecopsychotherapy* speaks to this as an emergent field.

As climate chaos quickens and increasing numbers of people are waking up to the seriousness of our environmental crisis, we are becoming more aware of our dysfunctional relationship with the earth – the body on whom we depend for everything. This awakening to our crisis is double-edged. On the one hand it is very painful to witness the suffering of land, creatures, and peoples as a consequence of the system we inevitably take part in. On the other hand, the crisis is pushing us to remember we are part of the web of life in all its incredible richness and mystery. We are in relationship with the earth from the moment we are conceived in our mothers' watery wombs. We are all born into land, with its own particular qualities and atmospheres. We often speak of falling in love with a special place on this earth and feel bereft when this place is destroyed by so-called "development". Wandering outside to see a wide expanse of stars, or spending time in the mountains or by the sea, can be potent, transformative, and healing.

Introduction

Many of us form important bonds with animals or trees. Our first experience of death in childhood might well be the loss of a beloved dog or cat. Some people escape from their dysfunctional families by seeking solace in the company of trees or with a close animal companion. A number of my clients may not have survived without these relationships; sometimes this has been their only experience in life of unconditional love. Gardens, parks, or beaches can be places of play where the doors to enchantment are opened. That is, of course, if we are privileged enough to have access to playing outdoors in childhood; for many, this has been replaced with play on screens, and those in urban areas may not have access to green space.

Yet most forms of psychotherapy and counseling focus on human relationships only. As early as 1960, psychoanalyst Harold Searles described how, “The nonhuman environment . . . is . . . considered as irrelevant to human personality development, and to the development of psychiatric illness . . . as though the human race were alone in the universe, pursuing individual and collective destinies in a homogenous matrix of nothingness” (1960, p. 3). This is part of a wider cultural attitude where we imagine we are sep-

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arate from, and superior to, all other life forms. It is this context in which we are practising psychotherapy today. Naturally we are seeing a rise in what many call “eco-anxiety” or “eco-grief” as the situation worsens. These are not pathological symptoms to be treated by therapy; rather, they are healthy responses to a world in crisis which need to be shared and held in community.

Earth lawyer Polly Higgins named the extensive destruction of ecosystems “ecocide” and urged the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to recognise ecocide as the 5th Crime against Peace. As psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe notes, “In framing ecocide as a war crime this bursts the gargantuan bubble of complacency that allows us to maintain the fiction that we are living in a time of peace” (Weintrobe, 2013, p. 1). Yet we continue.

The experience of psychotherapy tells us that change is neither easy nor linear. One part of the self wants to change while the other part wants to turn a blind eye, to carry on “as normal”. Many feel relieved that large numbers of people have taken to the streets, as part of Extinction Rebellion and youth climate strikes, but others have complained of the “disruption” to their “normal” lives. A serious diagnosis does

disrupt our daily routines! It requires us to step back and take a long hard look at where we are, in order to understand the roots of our malaise and how to bring ourselves back into balance.

This short book gives a flavour of ecopsychotherapy in practice, as well as its history, key themes, ideas, and controversies. Chapter 1 describes the practice of ecopsychotherapy outdoors. Chapter 2 takes a brief look at the history of ecotherapy as well as some of the diverse practices offered today, including the challenges facing this field. Chapter 3 offers an overview of ecopsychology giving some context and narrative for ecopsychotherapy. Chapters 4 and 5 return to the traditional setting of the therapy room, to explore the many ways in which our relationships with the more-than-human world enter into sessions. Chapter 4 focuses on how clients speak (or don't speak) about ecological crisis and how the therapist might respond. Chapter 5 explores how anthropocentrism comes into the work of therapy. Chapter 6 draws together some of the key threads of ecopsychotherapy. Chapter 7 goes beyond the very private practice of psychotherapy to look at the ways in which psychotherapeutic skills and insights might be of help to our dominant culture as

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we stumble towards an ecological civilisation, when many people are asking where we find hope during these troubled times. These chapters can be read in any order. For those who prefer to start with a theoretical overview, start with Chapter 3. For those wishing to start with ecopsychotherapy in the more traditional setting of the therapy room, start with Chapters 4 and 5. For those, like myself, who prefer to start with personal stories fresh from the woods, read the book as it is. Starting with practice, then finding a way to make sense of it, is how I learn. I have found this to be at odds with our dominant culture which often starts with concept before moving into practice.

All clinical material has permission to be shared and is heavily disguised.

A note about the word “nature”: in order to avoid the way in which our language gives the impression that humans are separate from nature (e.g., “going out into nature”) I will be using a range of phrases such as “other-than-human world”, “more-than-human world”, or “the rest of nature”. I will sometimes capitalise Nature to mean the greater whole, the sacred web of life in whom we dwell.

1

Practising therapy outdoors

As I cross the threshold from tarmac to forest my senses are awakened: verdant green life abounds, the air is filled with bird conversations, with the rustling of trees, with the smell of leaves. I have space to breathe again. Views through the trees to the green hills beyond relax my perspective; what concerns might have been occupying my mind begin to fall away as I sink into my body. The rational mind, and its constant whirring of thoughts, gradually quietens. As the trees and I exchange our breath, I begin to see there is no sharp dividing line between my skin-encapsulated “self” and the rest of nature. The small “I” is now becoming aware of the larger self. Coming into relationship with the

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earth is literally grounding and has the capacity to stabilise the emotions and the whole body–mind. No wonder, then, that some therapists are working with clients outdoors.

In this chapter I will offer some of my own experiences of taking therapy outdoors and reflect on what this might offer to the process of individual psychotherapy. I started working outdoors with clients in 2007. At this point I had been immersed in the field of ecopsychology for a decade, during which time I had co-facilitated wilderness retreats on the west coast of Scotland with outdoor educator Dave Key. This experience confirmed for me that working with groups and individuals in wild places can be emotionally and spiritually transformative, in our relationship with our bodies and in our connection with the other-than-human world.

As I was considering how to offer therapy sessions outdoors my client Tina (who knew of my work as an ecopsychologist) asked if we could meet in the forest behind my house. We discussed this for some weeks, wondering together what this might mean to our work of several years. It felt like a huge leap into the unknown.

I had already been working as a therapist for over thirty years and, like most therapists, I had been trained to think of the therapy room as an important container for therapeutic work. The room remains unchanged from one month to the next and provides a safe, sealed environment for highly confidential, highly charged, sensitive and intimate exchanges. There were no trainings or guidance for working outdoors as a psychotherapist, although some therapists quietly admit to working in their gardens in the summer months.

Eventually Tina and I decided to meet at the edge of the forest, beside my house, at our usual session time. I invited her to lead the way through the woods where she found a sheltered spot to settle in, at the foot of a great oak. There was some awkwardness to begin with; the familiar chairs were gone and we were now on neutral ground, sitting side by side, shifting the power balance between us. As we settled into this place, feeling the warm shafts of sunlight filtering through the leaves, I noticed how deeply nourished and supported I felt as a therapist. The great oak who held our backs, providing a dazzling green canopy above, was part of the larger, living web containing us. While the

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relationship between the two of us remained central, the community of trees around us and all our relations who inhabit the forest (including dogs walking their humans) were now present in the session.

I also noticed that it took a little while to shake off a sense of unease, paranoia even, that I would be spotted by a colleague and “struck off” for transgression of boundaries! I gained confidence as I realised that this was a new form of therapeutic encounter which has become known as ecotherapy.

To begin with we continued with the same dialogue that we had been having indoors. But as the weeks passed we began to have some interesting meetings with others in the forest. I remember a moving moment in a session when Tina was unable to speak for some time. It was an anxious silence as I could tell she was feeling cut off and distressed; I tried to build a bridge with words, but the gap between us remained. This had happened in therapy sessions indoors many times previously. Tina’s mother had been a perfectionist living in an abstract world of academia; in the transference I became her critical mother. In turn, she became the not-good-enough daughter, feeling that anything she said was stupid or meaningless. She

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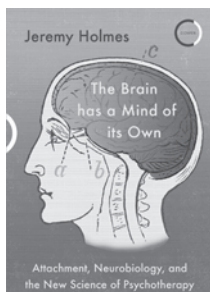
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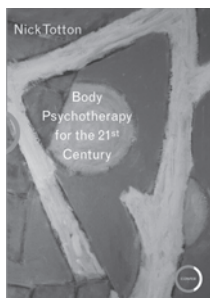
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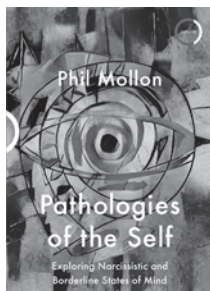
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