

Environmental Healing: Shifting from a Poverty Consciousness

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While increasingly people in western civilizations are waking up to the realities of the environmental crisis, anxiety and hopelessness also increase. Environmentalists continually cite statistics illustrating the Earth is in the midst of a mass extinction that, in short of a miracle, is inevitable and irreversible. While the seriousness of the environmental crisis cannot be ignored, it is important to remember that it arose from a western paradigm based on linear thinking and our error may be through viewing the crisis from the same paradigm. One of the most important ways we will bring environmental healing to fruition is through shifting our consciousness from a paradigm of scarcity to one of abundance.

Paradigms of the Environmental Crisis

Because of the presence of over five billion humans on the planet, we are losing species at a rate of 17,000 to 100,000 a year (depending on whose numbers you use): a worldwide implosion of plant and animal life that has only been equaled five times in the past five billion years (the last being the death of the dinosaurs).¹

It is extremely hard to ignore the devastating statistics associated with our present ecological crisis. Environmental scientists tell us that we are currently experiencing a mass extinction of the planet where no living species, including humans, will be unaffected. Issues including loss of species and natural habitats, global warming, deforestation, soil erosion, pollution and toxicity, and depletion of fossil fuels are at the heart of the ecological crisis and they continue to increase in severity. There are many who choose to ignore these statistics and others who are simply not aware of their full impact upon this planet and the connection between our consumption habits (people of western civilizations, specifically the United States, have the highest consumption levels worldwide). However, more and more people are waking up to the ecological crisis and addressing it.

The responses that arise from that reality are compounded by many feelings. There is terror at the thought of the suffering in store for our loved ones and others. There is rage that we live our lives under the threat so avoidable and meaningless an end to the human enterprise. There is guilt; for as members of society we feel implicated in this catastrophe and haunted by the thought that we should be able to avert it. Above all, there is sorrow. Confronting so vast and final a loss as this brings sadness beyond telling.²

Yet as we wake up to environmental realities, we tumble into a world that seems to be falling apart. Our consumptive habits are revealed in full and we see the link between

our lifestyles and the deteriorating Earth. We see a scarcity of resources, and a long line of seemingly endless impending environmental problems that, by far, outnumber potential solutions. Those that choose to join the environmental movement whether through political action, lifestyles changes, working on technological and cultural solutions, or through multiple forms of action, may develop a stronger sense of empowerment in halting environmental destruction. Yet when considering how many people have not been converted to taking action and how impending ecological issues are, feelings of anger, despair and hopelessness penetrate the environmental movement. This is one example that links our psychological health to that of the planet.

The field of Ecopsychology arose in the 1970's most predominately with the work of Theodore Roszak. Ecopsychology bridges the gap between ecology and psychology in viewing the ecological crisis. Traditional environmentalists tend to look at the problem in terms of science, while most psychologists do not even consider the environment. Ecopsychology sees the environmental crisis as a psychological crisis where humans of western civilization have separated their identities from the rest of the natural world, which leads to seeing the planet as material resources for human consumption. A major assumption is that *the illness is embedded in the history and culture of western civilization*. The critical theory of Ecopsychology looks at how western civilization spurred the environmental crisis by creating this perceived disconnection ranging from the institutionalization of domestic agriculture, the role of language and abstract thought, the role of mechanistic science, and colonization.³ The western paradigm is seen as

linear, looking at parts, rather than whole systems. Ecopsychologists call for a shift in worldview and practice that will re-embed our psyches into the natural world.

While there are so many waking up to our ecological crisis, its images are disturbing and its scope and impact leave most with feelings of hopelessness. Often the most adamant environmentalists express that it is too late to turn this situation around even if we did drastically transform our consumption habits. To many, the ecological crisis is irreversible. However, this sense of fatalism is another manifestation of a linear paradigm.

Johnston presents three paradigms of thinking about the future.⁴ While he does not directly address the ecological crisis, his categories are helpful. The first is the *onward and upward paradigm* which, translated to the environmental crisis, is a worldview that assumes scientists or the government will invent something to solve it, so we need not worry. The second is the *polar view* which assumes our problems will lead to "Armageddon; nuclear, environmental or economic catastrophe." Lastly is a more *evolutionary scenario* that includes "elements of each while stepping beyond either."

Most people working within the environmental movement operate from the polar view where we must wake up to the environmental crisis as time is running out. Solutions are about conservation, alternative technologies, restoration, and environmental law and regulation, and most of them work on an assumption that there are limited resources on Earth and we are rapidly approaching a time where things will fall apart. No matter how

hopeful people may be within this camp, when you add up their reasoning, there is little hope for a true shift that does not result in destruction.

Winter and Kroger present similar environmental paradigms of *boomsters* and *doomsters*. *Boomsters* parallel the *onward and upward* worldview, believing "...that as capital wealth accumulates, countries can afford better pollution control measures", leaving the work of environmental repair in the hands of scientists and governments.⁵ *Doomsters* parallel the *polar view* "...describing the coming environmental hell in graphic detail, they scare their audience with dreadful prophecies, then promise salvation through conversion to a new ecological worldview", yet doomsters lack a true shift to this "new ecological worldview" failing to embrace possible *evolutionary scenarios*, and instead employ a sense of fatalistic environmental disaster.⁶

Healthy functioning requires that we have faith that our needs will be met in the future; without this confidence, our trust in the world is damaged. Damaged trust can lead to four neurotic reactions that are likely to impact environmental behavior: narcissism, depression, paranoia, and compulsion.⁷

In a psychological context, prescribing to a doomster paradigm is extremely dangerous. As people are exposed to data that support inevitable environmental destruction, they are more likely to subscribe to a doomster paradigm, resulting in increased psychological problems. As our anxieties increase, we reinforce this gloomy paradigm, creating a perilous feedback loop. One way to break this cycle comes with recognition of the short

fallings of our western paradigm in engaging ecological problems. This has been an important contribution of many ecopsychologists, deep ecologists, ecosophists, evolutionary psychologists, systems theorists, ecospiritualists, and those employing ancient and indigenous ways of knowing.

Although, the environmental movement most frequently espouses a polar or doomster view, it is important to note that there is a current shift that is moving to more evolutionary paradigms. As areas such as spirituality, feminine and indigenous wisdom, systems theory, cosmology, consciousness, and metaphysics are integrated into philosophy and practice surrounding the ecological crisis, revolutionary ways of thinking and acting emerge. This is extremely hopeful and reorienting to evolutionary scenarios that transcend our linear realities must continue to grow.

Poverty Consciousness and the Western Paradigm

...most people believe in and operate from a psychology of scarcity and lack.

The psychology of lack relies upon wide acceptance of the belief in physical scarcity.⁸

The western paradigm is based on mechanistic science and employs rational, linear thinking. On a scientific and economic level, the world is reduced to measurable, material components. Processes are ordered and the natural resources of this world are finite and serve the needs of the human inhabitants of the Earth. Western psychology, for the most part, focuses on the ego as our true selves and is extremely individualistic. The

western paradigm reeks of isolation; humans are separate from the natural world; the natural world is composed of finite resources; and these resources are for human consumption.

Subscribing to a worldview that only recognizes material resources and sees these as a limited, finite quantity creates a poverty consciousness where “...the separative ego consciousness is the psychological source of poverty, lack, conflict, human degradation, competitive hostility, craving and exploitation.”⁹ People embedded in a western worldview operate under this poverty consciousness. No matter how much we obtain, we are still competing with others for material resources. Everything is quantified and the world becomes a hostile place. Our trust in the universe and one another is destroyed because we are competing against one another and the universe does not have enough resources to meet all of our needs.

Translating the western paradigm to the ecological crisis, it is easy to see how even those who recognize the crisis, can easily succumb to the polar/doomster worldview. The crisis is described through a series of facts and figures – statistics on species and other natural resources declining, temperature and sea levels rising, increased percentages of toxicity in food, soil, water, and our bodies. It is all so discomfoting. Yet the ecological crisis is a crisis of our homes and while this includes physical resources, it is also a crisis of all of our resources – our psyches or souls, our ability to feel and deeply engage; our capacity to see beauty and to love.

As more people approach the ecological crisis from a less quantitative worldview, there is greater recognition that we cannot employ the same frame of reference that perpetuated it. For example, Bonnett focuses on the need to translate sustainability from a policy to “a frame of mind.”¹⁰ His term might be clarified to a state of being rather than a state of mind, as the western obsession with philosophical thought is problematic in itself.

Misra contends that it is more about what we value and we need to shift our paradigm to one where development and divinity “...do not clash.”¹¹ Our western notions of wealth, abundance, and development are posited upon economic prosperity, rather than the ecological and social health of the living world. Boldt reminds us that the western field of economics is based on scarcity – ‘a science concerned with choosing among alternatives involving scarce resources.’¹² With economics and science at the heart of the western paradigm, nature becomes something we own and “Implicit in the ideology of ownership of nature is the psychology of scarcity and poverty.”¹³ As long as we are wed to an exclusively western paradigm, we are sold to the idea that this world does not have enough to sustain us.

Johanna Macy is well known for her despair and empowerment work that supports individuals and groups to open up to the sorrow of the ecological crisis as well as assist people to not become immobilized by it. In addition, Macy (in partnership with Molly Young Brown) offers a framework for a “Great Turning” that would reunite humans with the larger living system. They identify three areas needed for this “Great Turning” to occur: “actions to slow the damage to the Earth and its beings”; “analysis of structural

causes and creation of structural alternatives”; and “a fundamental shift in worldview and values.”¹⁴ In terms of shifting from a poverty consciousness that recognizes abundance, this last category is most relevant. However it is extremely important to recognize that we cannot move towards this shift until we acknowledge the problem. The ecological crisis is real and pending. We cannot overlook its seriousness, nor minimize the importance of grieving as a point of transformation. Along similar lines, “actions to slow the damage” and “creation of structural alternatives” are equally important. There are amazing developments occurring with a variety of sustainable technologies, environmental regulations, and personal commitments to less destructive ways of living, as well as amazing people speaking out and taking action. However these alone will not foster environmental healing. We must shift our paradigms.

Alternatives: Breaking away from the Linear Mindset

Clearly, the inherent mystery and fluid integrity of nature conceived as self-arising, and the world of open, infinitely faceted things are not susceptible to an engagement that is preoccupied with intellectual (and other) possessions and that is articulated exclusively through conceptual schemes.¹⁵

How do people of western civilization, particularly those addressing the environmental crisis, shift from a scarcity paradigm to one that spawns abundance in the context of our environmental realities? This is one of the most important questions of our time and few are addressing it. Breaking out of a linear mindset is an extremely difficult task. The linear mindset and our western culture go hand in hand, so in essence, we are a product of

a mechanistic, rational worldview, and the way we operate is drenched in this way of being. It is our paradigm. While we may recognize that addressing our ecological and in truth, cultural and spiritual, crisis using the same paradigm that caused it; in order to shift to a new paradigm, we need to consider different realities that may contradict what we traditionally know about the universe. An abundant paradigm realizes that while the environmental crisis is real, the way we account for resources employs the same linear reality that created the crisis. In shifting our consciousness (and behaviors) we would realize that there are so many resources that we do not consider and, in fact, we are not very familiar with the regenerative powers of the cosmos and the connection between our psyches and the universe. This new paradigm will illustrate that the Earth and cosmos are not comprised of static, finite resources and laws and, in fact, the universe is an abundant force that is regenerative, nurturing, creative, and dynamic.

Currently there are amazing developments in the fields of systems theory, spirituality and consciousness, and creativity that shift away from a linear paradigm of viewing the world. At the same time, there are older traditions of wisdom including indigenous cultures and spiritual philosophies and practices that provide us with new possibilities. Their implications are far beyond our linear notions of possible scenarios for the future, moving to a more supportive, regenerative, and empowering view of the universe.

Systems Theory

Systems theory is a powerful model of providing an alternative way of seeing the universe. The introduction of systems theory into the field of western science marked an

extraordinary transformative moment, a shift in paradigm. Leaders in the physical sciences and other academic fields, who were once embedded in a linear, specialized reality, recognized that extant meaning could no longer be obtained by only looking at the parts of isolated systems independently of a larger whole. Instead, the larger system of the cosmos and its processes needed to be considered along with its parts. This realization brought a critical analysis of the mechanistic, parts-oriented western paradigm that had dominated since Descartes. Systems theory, like most sciences, is a very complex field that is not readily accessible to a larger audience. However some of the concepts within it are truly fascinating and can change the way we think about the living world.

The essence of systems theory is holism – the living universe is an interconnected entity, so we cannot isolate any aspect as separate from the entire structure. However, we can look at one aspect of the system as representative of the whole system. This has amazing implications for, under our western paradigm, we assume that the bigger the force is, the more impact it will have. Translating this to the environmental crisis, we look at the rates of exponential population growth and environmental destruction and see this as infinitely more powerful than our possibilities for healing. Yet within a systems framework, this is not necessarily true. In fact the smallest part of the system also influences the entire system and actually has the potential to change it. This idea is found within the concept of *dissipative processes* where all complex, open, living systems are not linear and static, but actually operate “...far from thermodynamic equilibrium, where small fluctuations can be amplified to produce large effects...”¹⁶

Take the principle of *non-local phenomena* or *non-locality* that resulted from an experiment that discovered that “...two particles – even though separated by millions of miles – were instead part of the same thing....”¹⁷ The separated particles responded the same exact way when only one was subjected to an altering phenomenon. This suggests that while things appear distinctly separate, there is actually some sort of energy force that links them. This energy or intelligence has been termed the *noosphere*¹⁸ or *psi*¹⁹ by philosophers, Teilhard de Chardin and Reiser, respectively.

An extraordinary principle somewhat related to systems theory is morphogenetic (morphic) fields (also known as morphic resonance) and the law of formative causation developed by Rupert Sheldrake. Similar to non-locality, morphic fields suggests there is a linked pattern of development or consciousness between similar organisms. As non-locality demonstrated this link between particles, morphic fields translates this link to areas such as memory and consciousness. A morphic field arises in response to “random mutations.” As an entity develops a new pattern in response to new stimuli, this pattern will be available to entities with the same initial patterns. Hence a wave of change can occur through a species or other living phenomena. This idea is embodied in the law of formative causation that suggests that as these new patterns emerge and “...grow stronger...”, they become the norm.²⁰

The magnitude of this mystery is staggering. The great majority of the matter in the universe is utterly unknown, except through its gravitational effects. Yet

through the gravitational field, it has shaped the way in which the universe has developed. It is as if physics has discovered the unconscious. Just as the conscious mind floats, as it were, on the surface of the sea of unconscious mental processes, so the known physical world floats on a cosmic ocean of dark matter.²¹

Quantum theory provides a mathematical, measurable understanding of systems theory. Both fields have shaken our western understandings of mathematics and science, demonstrating that our linear understanding of the universe is flawed. While systems theory falls most frequently within scientific circles, its theories are applicable to all areas and many are applying them to unique disciplines. After all, if all things are interdependent we must be able to integrate these various areas and see their interconnectedness.

Applying these principles to the poverty consciousness paradigm we use in viewing the ecological crisis, we need to recognize two things. First, the linear fashion we use to account for both physical resources and the regenerative powers of the universe are inaccurate. The universe is not a fixed quantity; in fact “Astrophysicists have recently estimated that more than 90 percent of the material in the universe is invisible.”²² In addition, all living entities are actually connected by a unifying force which has profound regenerative capacities. Moreover, living organisms are constantly transforming their selves in order to evolve with life. Second, this unifying force includes human consciousness, so the way we think about things actually contributes to or detracts from the living world. If we view things as not alive or incapable of regeneration, we

negatively influence the system. When we acknowledge the regenerative powers of the living world, we embrace a paradigm that restores our trust in the universe, and we positively contribute to the system.

Indigenous Wisdom, Spirituality, and Feminine Receptivity

... the quantum physicist and the spiritual sage are beginning to describe much the same world. At root, both are merely observing how energy and web dynamics work in our very real world.²³

It is interesting that systems theory is quite similar in its ideology to the principles found within spiritual traditions such as Buddhism and yogic philosophies, indigenous wisdom, and feminine receptivity. In essence, all of these belief systems look at the interconnectedness of life, a dynamic flow where the microcosm affects the macrocosm and vice versa. The visible (and invisible) world is in constant motion and the motion of even the smallest element, can precipitate the greatest change. Everything is interrelated. Principles such as non-dualism, and/both, reciprocity, holism, cyclic motion, spirals, holographs, causal effect, and cosmic evolution pervade these areas of thought. In looking at the true nature of systems theory, this realization is not surprising. A theory that considers the interconnected dynamics of the complex living world would of course mirror other life embracing philosophies.

Complexity is at the center of many spiritual traditions – especially the ones that align with the living universe. It is really interesting how the use of metaphor, story, and art

has been utilized to convey the principles of complexity – the great myths found in ancient religions and cultures, visuals such as mandalas, and even structures like the Great Pyramids. Since complexity is so hard to grasp imagery and story can relay the idea of dynamism while conveying some sort of stability within our world. There is a common story shared whether perceived through philosophies such as spiritual mathematics, mystical ecology, or Native American cosmologies. The natural world follows a pattern. While it is constantly changing through self-creation, it aligns with certain principles – having a structure and interacting elements.

Indigenous wisdom, spirituality, and concepts of feminine receptivity are realms that are not centered on rational thinking and mechanistic science, instead employing a larger, more holistic framework. These areas are invaluable guides for making a perceptual shift from a western worldview that holds a poverty consciousness to one that trusts and participates in an abundant, resilient world. It is no coincidence that the historic formation of a mechanistic worldview evolved during a period where the wisdom and welfare of both indigenous peoples and women were dismissed and oppressed. It is also no coincidence this linear worldview paralleled resource consumption and environmental degradation.

In many indigenous traditions, the feminine energy is related to nature and receptivity.²⁴ In writing about his West African, Dagara, culture, Malidoma Somé identifies the five natural elements: water, nature, fire, mineral or stone, and earth.²⁵ Water and earth are considered feminine, while fire and mineral are masculine. Nature is in the middle. The

rise of the western worldview and industrialization brought an increase in utilizing minerals and fire for both science and structures, while consuming and polluting the water and earth. Along similar lines, Hartmann points out that "...nations where women have relatively equal position and power with men, there are lower birth rates, often even to the point of zero population growth..."²⁶

Feminine energy is important for all life forms, and it is accessible to both women and men. The feminine conveys a receptive process that is experienced in practices such as mindfulness and sensory experience. Fields such as Ecopsychology, Depth Psychology and Phenomenology explore these concepts in a more psychological and perceptual framework.²⁷

Through studying Taoists principles, Boldt writes, "The Receptive' is recognized and honored as the quintessence of the feminine, or yin, spirit. It is the living power of empty space..."²⁸ It is interesting that in relating the feminine energy with receptivity and also with empty space, we can transform the notion of power. Instead of thinking of power as a direct force, such as might, strength, or volume, we can see power as receptivity, deep engagement. This yields different possibilities and it also gives power to more feminine resources that seem empty but are immense such as beauty, listening, stillness, nurturance, engagement, and love.

New Cosmology

We can't, with a single command, halt the destruction of the soils and the animals and the children, but we can with a single decision begin the search for ways to align our own energies with the creative, restorative, and healing directions already taking place.²⁹

Our worldviews are shaped by our cosmologies – our stories that explain how the world works. In contrast to western cosmology that focuses on growth, science, and rational thinking, indigenous cosmological stories depict a more relational and creative world. Over the past decade or so, there has been a body of work advocating western cultures adopt a “New Cosmology” that shifts our mechanistic way of viewing the world to a worldview that is more sustainable.³⁰ Much of the work within this area focuses on telling the story of the universe – looking at the amazing dynamics that interplay to create this universe. For example, while our western scientific worldview previously saw the universe as a static entity, we now know that it is in fact continually *expanding*. New cosmology shifts both our egocentric and geocentric worldviews that aligns with the wonder of the cosmos, both humbling the role of humans and empowering us with reuniting our identities as creative beings.

Brian Swimme writes about the role of love in the cosmos, claiming this “...alluring activity permeates the cosmos on all levels of being. These allurements permeating you and everyone and everything else are fundamentally mysterious.”³¹ Swimme goes further relating love to the strange attractor concept found in systems theory. Dynamic attractors become the center of a system and actually define how the system evolves. A strange

attractor shifts a system in a chaotic, unpredictable manner, and is related to morphogenetic fields.³² If love is the alluring force of the universe, the strange attractor, through embodying love in our consciousness, we have immense transformative power.

Creativity and Abundance

...the evolutionary process is not designed and planned in advance in the mind of a transcendent God but is spontaneous and creative.³³

These various alternatives to the western paradigm all point to seeing the universe as a dynamic entity, constantly changing through its own creative process. As living beings within this universe, we too are gifted with creative potentials and have the power to shape this world in a non-linear manner. With this recognition, we can critique and transform the poverty consciousness in how we view the ecological crisis through realizing the universe is a regenerative, dynamic force. It is abundant with healing resources and we do not control it, and is an extremely mysterious entity.

I often recall a story the visionary, Caroline Casey, told a group of women around a bonfire one summer evening.³⁴ An oil company had gained the rights of indigenous land to drill for oil. The evening before the drilling was to begin; both indigenous peoples and activists performed a ceremony at the site asking the oil to recede. The next day, when the company drilled, they found no oil.

Paul Devereux tells a story of a German man who did a "...field study with the Lacandon Indians in the rain forests of southern Mexico." Through the course of his stay, he was regularly confronted with phenomena that did not fit within his western framework. After learning a healing spell, the man was able to stop the blood flowing from a severe machete cut almost instantly.³⁵ I have heard similar stories of indigenous peoples losing limbs and having the ability to grow them back. Stories like these, which under our western framework we quickly dismiss as tall tales may be, in actuality, more in line with how the universe works.

In developing a paradigm of abundance, it is extremely important to not become apathetic to the realities of the ecological crisis. We cannot simply dismiss our ecological realities and jump into a new reality. As touched upon previously, we must go through the work of recognizing the crisis and how it arose; seeing our role in perpetuating it; allowing ourselves to feel environmental despair; and utilizing the economic and political system, technology, and social forms of addressing the crisis. Along similar lines, we cannot simply adopt the worldviews of indigenous peoples in order to heal. Indigenous peoples across the planet are both suffering and speaking out in response to the ecological crisis, they are equally, if not disproportionately, affected.

To shift to a paradigm of abundance, we must restore our trust in the universe through recognizing its resilience and creative potentials. Moreover, we must see our own creative powers. To do this, we can begin by experiencing the wonder of this world and

participating with the larger life force. By truly shifting our own consciousness, we have immeasurable power to transform.

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- ²¹ Ibid, p. 95
- ²² Boldt. L.G. (1999). *The tao of abundance: Eight ancient principles for abundant living*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam, Inc., p. xxvi.
- ²³ Goerner, S.J. (no date). An integral view: *The sciences of complexity as a subset of a larger transformation*. Triangle Center for the Study of Complex Systems, p. 7
- ²⁴This is also explored in fields such as Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, and Ecopsychology.

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- ²⁵ Some, M.P. (1998). *The healing wisdom of Africa: Finding life purpose through nature, ritual, and community*. New York, NY: Penguin-Putnam, Inc.
- ²⁶ Hartmann, T. (1999) *The last hours of ancient sunlight: Waking up to personal and global transformation*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, p. 242.
- ²⁷ See Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books (A Division of Random House, Inc.) and Sewall, L. (1999). *Sight and sensibility: The ecopsychology of perception*. New York, NY: Penguin-Putnam, Inc.
- ²⁸ Boldt, L.G. (1999). *The tao of abundance: Eight ancient principles for abundant living*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam, Inc., p. 53.
- ²⁹ Swimme, B. (1996). *The hidden heart of the cosmos: Humanity and the new story*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, p. 58.
- ³⁰ See the works of Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, and Brian Swimme.
- ³¹ Swimme, B. (2001). *The universe is a green dragon: A cosmic creation story*. Rochester, VT: Bear & Company.
- ³² Sheldrake, R. (1991). *The rebirth of nature: The greening of science and god*. New York, NY: Bantam Books, pp. 92-93.
- ³³ Ibid, p. 71
- ³⁴ In 2002 at Ojai, California during a retreat incepting the group, *Unreasonable Women for the Earth*
- ³⁵ Devereux, P. (1996). *Revisioning the earth: A guide to opening the healing channels between mind and nature*. New York, NY: Fireside, pp. 28-30.