

## Recovering the Eco-Unconscious By Robin Gates

### History of Split with Nature

Much has been written about our Judeo-Christian doctrines and scientific objectivity as contributors to the Western world's split with nature. In other words, our lack of eco-consciousness has history. According to Ralph Metzner:

A core feature of the Euro-American psyche is a 'dissociative' split between spirit and nature....In some versions....spirit is not only separated from nature, but incompatible and opposed. The human spiritual is then always regarded as superior to the animal nature. (1995, p. 65)

As a result,

If we feel ourselves mentally and spiritually separate from our own nature (body, instincts, sensations, and so on), then the separation will also be projected outwards, so that we think of ourselves as separate from the great realm of nature, the Earth, all around us. If we believe that in order to advance spiritually we have to go against, to inhibit and control, the natural feelings and impulses of our own body, then this same kind of antagonism and control will also be projected outward, supporting the Western conquest nature ideology. (p. 66)

We "do not seem to hear, or see, or feel (our) mother's presence, we have become blind to the psychic presence of the living planet and deaf to its voices and stories" (p. 159).

In the article, *Ecopsychology and the Anima Mundi* (1994), Theodore Roszak believes that our primitive ancestors felt both wonder and awe at nature and experienced themselves as her children. He states that, "Many of the oldest rituals are acts of

propitiation offered to a sometimes fierce and punishing divinity, an Earth who can be an angry mother as well as a bountiful one” (p. 4). Hunting and gathering tribes appeared to have honored the Great Earth Mother Goddess, in the form of a voluptuous woman named Venus of Willendorf. However, as they moved away from the land and became more ‘civilized’, “her further adventures proceed along two contrasting, often conflicting routes, one religious, the other philosophical and eventually scientific. This bifurcation mirrors a deep psychological split that segregates emotion from intellect” (p. 4).

The metaphysical abstractions in Platonic cosmology, Roman philosophy, and the views of the Christian church, practically obliterated the image of the erotic, sacred Earth Mother as fertility goddess. “It was inconceivable that the (incorporeal) forms, in their pristine transcendence, could have any connection with the impermanent material world” (pp. 4-5). Although nature was created by God, it was “wholly other than God... Christianity (had) entrenched hostility to nature worship one of the deep roots of our environmental crisis” (p. 5). In the alchemical tradition of the middle ages, there was an attitude of human superiority and right to control and manipulate natural forces. Its practitioners believed there was a responsive mind of nature “whose sympathy we can win and whose secrets we can probe” (p. 6). By the end of the eighteenth century, “a new metaphor was displacing (The Great Mother-Nature),—that of the machine” (p. 6). According to Andy Fisher:

Such a bifurcation of reality (human-nature split), is historical; it reflects a withdrawal of reality into the head of the modern Western individual and a corresponding estrangement of that individual from the external social and

ecological world...as the soul is without world, the world is without soul. (2002, p. 8)

Healing requires a returning of soul to nature and nature to soul.

If as is evidenced by our history, we once had and have lost our relationship with nature and other non-human beings, and if according to Roszak, we are repressing the “ecological level of the unconscious leaving unawakened our inherent sense of environmental reciprocity,” (as quoted in Fisher, 2002, p. 4), then it is my contention that one has to try to recover it, but how?

### Carl Jung’s theories of individuation and psychic energy

Through individuation, a person develops her or his unique individuality from that which has been imposed on her or him from the environment, thereby, enabling a differentiation from that environment and an expansion of consciousness that is achieved by the confrontation with and integration of unconscious material. It is the path to center culminating in coniunctio, a union of the purified opposites. In the process of individuation:

The centre of gravity of the total personality shifts its position. It is no longer in the ego, which is merely the centre of consciousness, but in the hypothetical point between consciousness and unconsciousness. This new centre might be called the self. (Jung, CW vol. 13, 1929, par. 67)

In order for progress to continue, those elements which have become split off from consciousness, due to their incompatibility with the ego standpoint, must be re-claimed and integrated into consciousness which is no easy task due to the defenses surrounding them. Besides the importance of establishing balance, one must retrieve and integrate

these repressed parts of one's self because if they are not claimed as one's own, they will be projected onto the environment, thereby, creating the illusion that they exist outside of oneself. It is the purpose of the individuation process to reunite the opposites which have been separated, for example, through repression of those aspects of ourselves that we have rejected, which includes those of the culture, enabling a more authentic relationship with oneself, one's environment and the divine, and restoring balance and well-being to the psyche and potentially the entire being.

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According to the Gaia hypothesis, the goal of life is homeostasis, the planet being a single self-regulating ecology. Thus, if homeostasis in the natural world is continuously going on and it is mirrored in the psychic realm through the retrieval and integration of repressed parts of one's self, as in the individuation process, then when one has achieved a relatively high degree of psychic integration and, therefore, homeostasis, and has recovered this ecological unconscious in the process, the potential for relationship with nature organically develops. However to Metzner, merely knowing that an eco-unconscious exists is not enough, "unless supplemented by a recovery of ancient traditions of initiation" (1995, p. 62). Leslie Gray believes that we need "only to look at the cross-cultural practices of perennial shamanism to find effective models of applied ecopsychology" or as James Hillman states, we must get "out of Western history to tribal animistic psychologies that are always concerned with...the soul of things" (as quoted in Fisher, 2002, p. 5). However, I do not believe we need to nor can appropriate the ways of indigenous traditions, since these practices are contained within a culture that supports

them. What we need is to be initiated into a transformation of consciousness and recover this ecological unconscious in the process.

Our consciousness develops and expands as we come into contact with deeper autonomous energies and integrate shadow aspects of ourselves. “We need to know ourselves, to create an inventory of our mind, to learn to recognize the ideas, feelings, habits, blockages that prevent us from experiencing our unity with Nature” (Seed, 1994, p. 72). We learn through our personal psychic work that, “all phenomena mirror each other, intertwine, and arise only in contact with one another, which radically undoes our more usual dualistic, isolated-in-the head, feel for the world” (Elgin, 2001, p. 26).

Because ecological consciousness (or Self-realization, as it is also called) involves transcending the more narrow, biographic, egoic, or personal sense of self, (Warwick Fox) suggests that...the idea being that as one develops a sense of self that is both transpersonal and ecological, one will care for the earth without being morally persuaded to do so because one will identify with it as Self. It is thus through a process of psycho-spiritual growth that one will become motivated to develop an eco-centric lifestyle. (Fisher, 2002, pg. 25)

As a person’s consciousness expands, it consequently has the capacity to be attuned to the environment and resonate with other and different harmonies and realities. This expansion and development of a contemplative consciousness enable an interaction with and sensitivity to other forms of life allowing the awareness that consciousness flows in both directions, and a relationship with not only that which is larger in oneself but with nature and non-human beings. According to Alan Watts (1991), the nature of something is discovered by contemplation.

Looking at nature without thinking in the sense of narrowed attention... Things are brought into order through regarding them from a viewpoint unrestricted by the ego, since their pattern cannot be observed while looking and thinking piecemeal, nor when regarding them as objects apart from oneself, the subject... to observe silently, openly, and without seeking any particular result.

(p. 74)

Individuation is the path to center culminating in the alchemical stage of coniunctio, a union of the purified opposites. In this union, there is a suspension of ego-consciousness to a degree and an opening of the door to the marriage of soul to the divine “whereby the world is not set at a distance... but embraced to become one flesh” (Watts, p. 81). As an outgrowth of contemplation, we come in touch with the embeddedness of our nature in the larger Nature. This awareness is oftentimes accompanied by the perception of an uncreated light in nature. Illumination is a phenomenon that has been expressed in deep ecology literature before the term was even coined, for example, in the shamanic writings of Martine Prechtel, in William Blake’s poetry, and when John Muir “sensed trees and mountains shining with a kind of psychic aura, everything being luminously present as an interdependent whole” (Fisher, 2002, pg. 18). Science and religion also have their associations with light. In the article, *Promise ahead: A Vision of Hope for Humanity’s Future*, Elgin states:

The new physics describes light as the basic building block of material reality.... Because we live in a universe of light, it seems fitting to consider the soul as a more subtle body of light... Our core nature is ground luminosity.

(2001, pg. 162)

In this stage of individuation, the Mother is joined with the King, the ego is connected with the larger Self, the material world becomes enlivened and enchanted as one glimpses its deep beauty through the eyes of love, which is fundamental to the coniunctio, and the shroud of separation is lifted, if only temporarily.

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