

## Ecopsychology: Healthy planet, healthy people

Rich Heffern | Dec. 28, 2010 Eco Catholic

The following little drama takes place often when we visit our nearest organic food emporium. My wife and I wait in the checkout line. We watch the persons in front of us pay for their free-range eggs, their pesticide-free spinach, their freshly-squeezed herbal tinctures and their organic vitamins. Then the checker asks them to choose between paper or plastic. Either option is a choice that harms the environment, either by destroying trees or clogging landfills.



We take our turn and virtuously produce our cloth bag, thereby neatly disarming the

paper/plastic dilemma. My statement of righteous indignation about my predecessor in line as we walk out of the store is followed by my wife, bless her, pointing out some well-known instance when I too have fallen short.

Still I wonder: How can we have healthy people living on a dying planet? What good does it do to eat healthy and avoid chemical additives when the very life support systems on our world are under severe threat? Would a therapy session on the Titanic have been deemed effective?

The only discipline now that recognizes and explores this connection between the health of the planet and the wellbeing of the individual is one that is quite new. It is the emerging field of ecopsychology, sketched out for the first time in Theodore Roszak's book *The Voice of the Earth*.

The ecopsychologist asks: Does it make much sense to aspire to health in the individual when his or her surrounding and sustaining environment is on the decline in every way? Ecopsychology emphasizes the interconnectedness of the human psyche with the rest of life.

Fr. Diarmuid O'Murchu writes "A list of mental illness and the huge amount of stress that we suffer as humans are because of what we are doing to the planet, because of the ongoing destruction of the environment. Until we begin a new relationship with the cosmos around us, we can't know how to relate meaningfully to anything, especially our own innermost being. Without this meaningful relationship between humans and the Earth, the planet suffers profoundly and so do we suffer grievously both physically and in our psyches as well."

The emerging field of ecopsychology is just one sign in our times showing that old, tired-out views of our world

are slowly beginning to yield to fresher perspectives.

Rozsak writes: "We need a new discipline that sees the needs of the planet and the needs of the person as a continuum and that can help us reconnect with the truth that lies in our communion with the rest of creation."

We really cannot separate ourselves from everything else. Remnants of ancient oceans flow through our veins. Ashes of expired stars provide the material for our very cells. When we look into the night sky, the stars and the swelling emptiness that contains them are, precisely by virtue of their vastness, the cradle that makes our awareness possible.

"Ecopsychology holds that there is a synergistic interplay between planetary and personal wellbeing," Roszak says. "The term 'synergy' is chosen deliberately for its traditional theological connotation, which once taught that the human and divine are cooperatively linked in the quest for salvation. The contemporary ecological translation of the term might be: The needs of the planet are the needs of the person, the rights of the person are the rights of the planet."

Some issues that ecopsychology have brought into focus:

-- **Consumption habits.** What are the deep psychological roots of what Harvard psychologist Sarah Conn calls our 'materialistic disorders'?

-- **Child psychology and development:** Children are probably born closer to the ecological unconscious than they ever will be again. In what ways do we "educate" this innate consciousness of harmony with the natural world out of them?

-- **Design.** What would environmentally intelligent homes, workplaces, churches, cities look like? Why don't we have many such in the world today?

-- **The need for wilderness.** Does our mental health require access to authentic wilderness and our untamed fellow species? If so, what might be our best strategies for preserving the endangered lands and species?

### **Out of therapy into activism**

Some of the best thinking on ecopsychology comes from Jungian psychologist James Hillman. In his book *100 Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*, Hillman blames many of the social and environmental problems we face on the fact that the people who should be out there changing the world are in therapy instead. "They treat their pain as a symptom of personal pathology rather than as a goad to political action to bring about social change. Therapists create patients instead of citizens."

Ecologist John Seed puts it this way: "People are willing to die by the millions in defense of one social fiction after another-- a religion or political system of ideology. Yet attacks on the Earth which give rise to all of these and without which none could exist leave us completely numb.

"Because we haven't learned to identify with the living Earth, she fails to ignite in us anything near the passion and commitment that some of her lesser works manage to do. Though we are born, live and die in her, we have made ourselves unconscious of this. As Woody Allen said, 'The Earth and I are two.'"

A healthy planet is vital to our own spiritual, mental and physical health.



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Eco Catholic is an exploration of the green Catholic imagination and ecological spirituality. Contributors include Rich Heffern, NCR staff writer, columnist and author, and Carol Meyer, executive director of the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition.

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