

Cultural dialogue through Black/White senses of country: Towards an intermediate sense for Australian environmental wellbeing

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Introduction

What is 'country'? Is it the nation state or a small household on a quarter-acre block? Out of a journey to Aboriginal lands I learnt that, for the indigenous people I met, the word did not refer to either. Between the nation state and quarter-acre block there is space for redeveloping a shared sense of country – a shared sense derived from our indigenous and non-indigenous ancestors; a sense of community within a bioregion. To do this requires a sense of place that is bigger than self, partner and children yet is personal; that reaches to the boundary of all people, all of whom matter; that has its own power of habitat and other species (of which I am a part and by which I am constantly enriched). To achieve this shared sense we also need a country in which we feel free to travel and in which we feel incapable of becoming lost (for in this country are the roots of my identity, without which I am lost and nobody). This shared sense of country provides an impetus for environmental action, based on a self-interested concern that moves beyond backyard fences and, in the process, begins to dissolve the necessity for fences.

To explore this intermediate sense of place I will tell the story of a journey to another's country; a journey through which my own sense of country was enriched.

A journey to another's country

This story begins with a naive group of white Australians visiting a group of Aboriginal desert people for the first time. It was a journey inspired in part by the idea expressed by David Tacey (1995) that we are not an Australian until we have faced the desert. In some senses it is the story of a few white mountain people meeting with a black desert community.

In the spring of 1993 I was one of 10 people who crammed into a 12-seater minibus and set off to visit the Mimili Aboriginal community in Pitjantjatjara country in central Australia. This country covers 100 000 square kilometres of desert in the Everard Ranges in north-west South Australia. Inside the bus were my eco-psychology teacher Susan Bechio, some of her students and some of mine, who had just completed my first course in eco-psychology.

The trip was planned as part of a shared desire for cultural exchange between us and members of the Mimili community. The cultural exchange had begun the previous year when Susan invited members of the desert community to visit our Moora Moora country and the local Steiner school. The initial plan was for Angelina and her kinfolk to share some of their stories and to teach dance to our community members and school children. The experience of desert people visiting the mountain community was awkward, exciting and challenging. Our country is cold and often wet which was a shock for those straight out of the desert. Arranging times was a nightmare. Taking watches off and going with the flow was all very well in theory, but often led to the frustration of waiting around in the cold.

The same was true for our return journey to their Mimili country. Most of us had not been to the desert nor to an Aboriginal community. We were uncertain, expectant and somewhat anxious. After three days' driving we arrived at the community and set up camp outside the store manager's house. The heat was to us what the cold had been to our guests. The place seemed to be a dry, vast red plain dotted with rock hills and covered in an unknown array of scrub species. The desert stirred up old emotional wounds and strange dreams. In shock, we lay around for most of the day hiding from the heat. When they had visited us in the mountains they had huddled in front of the fire.

We were uncomfortable with how the Pitjantjatjara lived easily with the discards of our non-biodegradable technological world, which would be dropped where they were last useful. We marvelled at how relaxed and easy with themselves the elders appeared. Silent anger rippled through the group when young boys came near our camp with a slingshot to successfully hunt two baby hawks. They were probably some of the last wildlife within Landcruiser and rifle range.

After being shown which places we could visit, our group gathered each morning on top of a hill to sing and dance. After a camp breakfast, we walked into the centre of the community, meeting with the members who had visited us. Sitting in the red dust, conversations were stilted unless attention was directed to the quality of the men's hunting rifles or the women's necklaces, handmade from gum nuts. To make ourselves useful we helped with the store, unloading food and cleaning up before and after closing.

The intention of cultural exchange was hard to implement. Susan and I found it difficult to make clear that we were not there for a tourism experience. We could have had a corroboree then and there if we had paid. The young men who were asking us for money to dance thought we were after a freebie. Unbeknown to us, the community was soon to begin a tourism venture, with busloads coming in (for a fee) to the edge of the community for an *inma* (dance) and to buy handicrafts. Susan persisted and we finally prevailed on Angelina to sort out Hughie on the prior agreement about cultural exchange. On the last day we all painted up and danced. Later that night, in the back of old utes, we were trucked to an outstation where, under diesel lights, we danced with community elders. I participated in the emu

dance. Once inside the emu's skin I danced without feeling self-conscious about the quality of my performance. Black and white men, lost together emu dancing in the dust, was a magical moment.

Here was where I discovered my totem. By this I mean a particular species that speaks about me through its unique way of being. It has taken a long time to come to terms with my emu status; the one who pecks at this and that. Endowed with a long neck, I have always felt gangly and vulnerable due to my lack of coordination. Emus can be seen as kind of a cross between a bird and animal. While I had toyed with other species as a preferred totem, the emu has stuck. Maybe an emu totem expressed my uncertainty about being brought up in country on the urban/rural fringe? Is one's totem inside or outside? Is it a mirror for aspects needing recognition, development or both? (My use of animal totems is more psychological than spiritual. I do not see them, for example, as spirit guides or as a vehicle to communicate with the spirit world (Sams & Carson 1988; see Rose 1992 for an Aboriginal perspective).)

My musings about totems came after the emu dance and several others. Susan, who had originally been taught by Sioux Indians, shared a Sioux dance. Those watching were probably as bewildered as I by a white woman dancing a Native American dance as a cultural offering to Central Australian Aborigines! This raised the question: what do we have culturally that is worth sharing? We did not have a professional singer or dancer in tow, and as for popular culture, such as Australian Rules football or rock and roll, their youth were evidently better players than any of us. I was embarrassed by our cultural void and I wished that I knew the Scottish bagpipes in deference to my Celtic ancestors!

My evolving sense of shared country

After two years away from Australia, and bursting into unexpected tears on sighting gum trees in California, I can identify a little with Aborigines' identity loss when taken from their country. Returning from visiting Pitjantjatjara country I realised that my country is not the house I live in or the community of which I am a founding member. It is more. It is the Yarra country that covers the mountain headwaters down to the slow meandering of the Yarra River. Its name derived from the original inhabitants: the Yarra Yarra Tribe. One label for my country is dots on a map that are connected by a river and roads; another is the rural fringe of Melbourne. Another is that here is where my mother is buried. I still live where she brought me into country. This is country that owns me, simply because this is where I have always lived.

My arrival in country began with birth and early childhood in a place on a small creek tributary that fed into the Yarra, on a dairy farm that is now part of the Melbourne suburb of Doncaster and its freeways.

My sense of place was shaped by a number of things, including a lineage that was a Scottish (McGregor clan) and English (Cornish coal mining) amalgam, with a father who loved and drew healing directly from the land. Mine was a post-war birth, with the optimism of the 1960s. Living in country on the urban/rural fringe resulted in my being a person who felt different and uncertain about my place. My suburban schoolmates and I loved the scope for fishing and rabbit hunting in our country, and the freedom of its space. On becoming tertiary educated, however, I became self-conscious of place.

For most of my adult life I have lived up in the head waters of Yarra country, on top of Mount Toolebewong, overlooking Melbourne. My house is on the edge of grazing country and a forest of mountain ash and stringy bark. Its pastures allow continued expression of my farming childhood, while its forest provides a new opportunity to engage with nature. The land is shared with fifty others who are part of the Moora Moora community. My country is infused with a shared sense of responsibility. It is not individually owned, but privately owned by the group. My attachments to this place, some shared and some not, rub along with others. As these attachments are shared, I am not alone in looking after the country, nor do I possess a monopoly on sense of country.

The changing ways of engaging with such a naturescape are illustrated by our first sixteen years of 'pioneering'. These years involved building a community infrastructure (roads, a school, houses, gardens, fences) and managing pasture and animals. In the beginning, we were absorbed in a nature connection based around making our homes of the earth and developing energy systems with wind and sun. In orthodox senses we were private community developers concerned with plans, designs and the bricks and mortar of life. If we identified with anyone it was as part of the alternative movement but in many ways we were no different from our white pioneering ancestors, busy reshaping nature as well as adapting to cold winters; experiencing for the first time what it is like to live with snow and biting winds (Cock 1979).

The community has evolved from intention to organisation to culture. In parallel, my engagement with the land has diversified. I have shifted from being a moulder of the place to a listener; from walking the paddocks to walking the forest; from looking to Melbourne and the sea to considering the ants below my knees. Maybe turning to dialogue with the mountain only became possible after the pioneering that I had done. My nurture shifted from the success of human community achievements to drawing from the landscape – the beginnings of a different dreaming. But I needed a teacher to show me how this was possible; only then did this missing piece from my engagement with my country begin to take shape and find expression (Cock 1995).

Some lessons from a white encounter with black senses of country

Being born into a strong sense of community and a strong sense of one's place being sacred has been basic to keeping Aboriginal communities alive in the face of threats of extermination. Battered, infected and killed, with their children separated from family and country, Aborigines culturally held on to life through aeons of Dreaming. Songline threads of community with the land did not break. These threads are now as much under threat in white communities as in black. We are all threatened by community erosion no less damaging than that of our soil.

There is much we have to learn from our first peoples: we have to learn commitment to local senses of country and we have to learn to get off our speed treadmill, with its efficiency-at-all-costs mentality. Traditionally Aborigines worked an average of four hours a day, happily sitting, talking and listening at other times. If we followed suit our environmental demands and stress would be reduced. Not only would we all be working but we would have the time to take care of ourselves, our communities and nature.

Too many white Australians have lost their intimate engagement with a sense of country; they are duped in the large cities into believing that they do not need nature for their wellbeing. A few utterly dependent flower pots as a symbolic expression of nature will not suffice, nor will a phone call to grandparents once a month. Neither can sense of place be substituted with virtual reality experiences. Globalisation and the techno culture is a far greater threat to our personal engagement with country than a nationalism developed through identification with the unique qualities of the Australian landscape.

Whites are struggling with the extremes between disconnected private and public senses of country. At one extreme is a sense of private country that does not extend beyond a suburban block fence. At the other is a sense of public country that has been defined in terms of national government, its armed forces and bureaucracies.

Both these senses of country are under attack. The public nation state is under attack from multi-nationals, global governance, communications, markets, tourism and westernisation. Private country is under assault from the diminishing size of the family/household with increasing mobility between places, and intimacy with others. It is increasingly rare for us to stay in the one place with the one spouse for a generation. The false myth of individualistic humanism says we can be separated from country and community, wander from place to place, and still be whole, powerful people. It is unrealistic to expect isolated individuals, engaged in a daily practice of partnership with nature, to be sustained. Individually we are not that powerful.

My sense of country was changed by the experience of being with another culture in their place. It made me aware that my sense of country was not just national or domestic but also included an important intermediate dimension. I learnt that this additional sense of country is also vital to my wellbeing. We need to redevelop the

meaning and focus of country. We need to achieve a shared sense of country through tribe/community within an awareness of one planet (Rose1992, chapter 13). What is new to such a sense of country is the awareness that we are part of the one planet. As a result of the picture of Gaia spinning in space, our sense of country can never again be experienced in isolation.

What has not changed is that community redevelopment is a vital part of the process for the renewal of an intermediate sense of country. We are dependent on a sense of country through community as a base for collective environmental action. This sense of country needs to:

- celebrate our first peoples' intermediate sense of country as our vital roots for a future
- extend beyond an individualistic sense of country yet be personal and intimate
- honour a sense of country that is rooted in a local community of people and species
- not be defined by media-generated superficial symbols of a nationwide sense of nationalism
- be conscious of its place within the earth system
- be the result of living in and knowing one's country through enough time (if we are to be country carers)
- redevelop an eco-spirituality that is dependent on roots in place, and on a community of people and species.

White environmentalism needs to direct energy to redeveloping a sense of community in country. However, strength and spirit from community and place is dependent on knowing and keeping our place in nature. Transcending materialistic individualism through shifting the focus of spirituality from 'sky' to 'earth and sky' is not helped by urban-based images of the beautiful sunset on a warm summer's night. As wonderful as they are, images like this are no substitute for the work of living in and with country. Such instant transcendence hits are a substitute for being within the earth. This leaves us vulnerable to our techno/virtual culture, creating a false sense of our power as the earth's god and, as such, no longer capable of listening to and learning from anything other than ourselves.

The challenge of intercultural encounter

I am not sure that we achieved a cultural exchange. Maybe we made a little contribution through our willingness to go out of our comfort zones. Maybe instead of seeing in us the history of whites' non-recognition, our hosts saw a glimmer of our respect for their first people status and our recognition that they are a living pathway to our own first people roots. How easy it is to fail in such a venture. For the ignorant, hurt can be a word away. Hurt may come from unspoken expectations, unheard meanings and unknowing gestures that may offend. This

possibility creates anxiety and self-consciousness that drains the possibility of a free-flowing meeting.

Such encounters, even through the more commercial channels of tourism, provide an opportunity for Aborigines to represent their cultural history to non-Aborigines and, in the process, recreate and protect their own culture. For the individual it offers the chance to regenerate self-esteem and gain some employment.

Apart from the issue of how to do it, when does sharing one's culture or country with others become appropriation? (see Pearce 1995) Rabuntja, an Aboriginal elder said that 'all Australians born here belong to the Dreaming'. Cultural exchange becomes cultural appropriation when the cultural activities that are performed are driven by outsider demand rather than community demand, and when the outsider becomes a stimulus for performances and other cultural activities, independent of local traditions. For the integrity of intercultural meetings, the outsider must play a subsidiary, minority guest role to local affairs. This requires careful planning to protect the community, such as limits on the number of visitors, where they can stay and what they can and cannot do (such as not taking photographs of sacred sites).

A place for cross-cultural challenge within a commitment to diversity

Sharing our experiences of different country is a sound basis for intercultural dialogue. The experiences of others, through history, novels and travel, help to bring home our own sense of country. The contrast of difference enriches our own experience and puts one's intimate country into perspective as part of the planet.

Cross-country and cross-cultural encounters can lead to eco-cultural idealisation by visitors of either community, unwilling to see, let alone confront, difficult issues. While this is understandable, given previous attempts to wipe out Aboriginal culture, there is the danger of going to the other extreme of uncritical celebration. Cross-cultural exchange means not just a willingness to accept diversity but a willingness to use that diversity as a basis for challenge. One risk inherent in multiculturalism is that of repressive tolerance of destructive actions (Marcuse 1964) which, for the sake of intercultural harmony, go unchallenged. All ways of living in country, from whatever cultural frame, need to be accountable to ecological assessment. There are many ways to love country but the frame needs to be held by accountability to sustainability criteria. Otherwise ecology pays the price for tolerance of difference. We are in danger of becoming so politically and culturally correct that neither cultural group is willing to challenge the other; not only for fear of the charge of racism but also because of an awareness that we are all living in glass cages when it comes to our environmental performance. This lack of challenge from the environmental movement has helped to promote destructive responses.

Since white settlement, Aborigines' previously ecologically sound practices have been corrupted by their more sedentary lifestyle and by white technology. For example, older black community members may not know that a discarded plastic plate does not decompose quickly. The ecological compatibility of their everyday actions can no longer be assumed and left unchallenged. The shared throw-away attitude of white and black society stems, in the case of each, from a radically different base. When Aborigines graft whites' throw-away culture onto their heritage, the outcome is a mess. Whites have had longer to learn and adapt to the outcome of their waste. This difficulty has been reinforced by what the head of the Native Title Tribunal calls a cargo cult expectation (matching our guilt-driven paternalism) that undermines efforts towards community regeneration, reliance and eco-sustainability.

A possible ecological advantage of cultural exchange is that it may put pressure on the local people to re-examine their approach to wildlife. The range and power of the gun and four-wheel-drive have replaced traditional ways of hunting, with consequent wildlife eradication for kilometres around permanent settlements. Unless some white land management practices are adopted, such as restricting the use of such technology or adopting and enforcing hunting bag limits, wildlife will continue to be threatened.

The intercultural dialectic needed to produce a synergy between black and white approaches to environmental management is dependent on:

- black communities acknowledging that they are no longer living a mobile, organic life and that they need to be more active managers of their impact on the land, and
- white communities ensuring real limits to their impact on the land and acknowledging the limits of technology to clean up after them.

What needs to be faced is that black and white approaches to environmental management come from radically different starting points. Because of the power of their technology and the extent of their impact on the land, whites assume that they have to be responsible for managing that impact, whereas, historically, blacks largely left nature to be the manager who cleaned up their waste. Neither approach is sufficient now without the aid of the other.

Sharing country as the basis for common ground

We need to celebrate 'sharing in common' this country. This sharing can submerge our differences. We can share the love of wild naturescapes. The desert for the Pitjantjatjara, and the mountains and the sea for me, are naturescapes where humans, whether they like it or not, are part of nature and accountable to its power. Human power has not conquered such places. For these reasons naturescapes are places for being enriched, whether one is white or black, through simply being there.

The different ways we approach country adds to the richness of this sharing. Each dimension – one's home garden, nation, intermediate country of tribal lands or neighbourhood – provides a way of connecting with country. We need each of these different senses of country in order to develop and maintain our wellbeing. The black and white emphasis may differ, but these differences can enrich our common struggle to find a balance between senses of country that will work for each culture.

Each is challenged by virtual globalisation. The roots of our sense of place are vital as a counterbalance to the air-realm of virtual reality that is sweeping the cities and disconnecting our consciousness from its earthly source.

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Eco-psychological practice for nature carers

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Why an eco-psychology for environmental education?

Nature is a vital resource for the wellbeing of all our human dimensions. Early next century we face the risk that the next generation of environmentalists will have only virtual reality experiences to inspire them about what nature was, or could be; unless, of course, they are rich enough to purchase private havens or to go on packaged eco-tours. Most will then become dependent on their consciousness as their sole source of eco-caring. This consciousness will be based more on observing and analysing a picture of nature rather than from being in nature. They will be missing the well of unconscious childhood experiences that root us in the earth, making them more vulnerable to the argument of fashion. How can we facilitate clarity of purpose and depth of commitment in the postmodern world of relativism? When culture is no longer a criterion for judgment, we need to look to our human nature in nature as our reference point.

We know we depend on nature physically for food, air and water. We know that nature connections through domestic pets mean we live longer and are mentally and physically healthier. We know that being in nature in recreational mode (gardening, bushwalking, sailing) usually regenerates energy, dissolves stress and clears the mind (Shepard 1982, 1995; Midgley 1983; Jarman 1991). Nature bonding can be reinforced and may be developed through drawing directly from nature for psychological practice. To understand why the great naturalists were nature carers we need to review their childhood and the quality of their nature experiences. How and when did they play in nature, discover themselves, lose themselves and feel free and wild? (see Roszak 1995; Houston 1987; Gallagher 1993; Roads 1990) Children with access to direct experiences know kinship with nature (see Nabhan & Trimble 1993).

We are, however, squeezing out the last vestiges of nature from our cities and, in particular, from the childhood backyards and creeks that nurture our being in nature: experiences that spawn the knowledge that we live in and also through other species. It is the encounter with this diversity of nature that is a critical resource for exploring various dimensions of being human. In other articles I have begun to write about the contribution of eco-spirituality and eco-psychology to sustainable development of person and planet (Cock 1991, 1995, 1996). Suffice it to say here that an attack on Gaia's (Lovelock 1988) regenerative capacity is our ultimate madness. In response to narrow self-interest, environmentalism has come to be seen as a selfless concern; a high moral ground that is disconnected from our own interest or person; a movement of the rich and educated who can afford to

care. It is a movement of concern largely about being in conflict with someone else's behaviour. The hard issues of changing our own behavioural and cultural patterns have been masked by the perception that it is not in our interest.

Commitment to the larger Self (see Mathews 1991; Roszak 1992; Fox 1990) as part of Gaia, however, has been part of what makes it possible for eco-carers to put their life on the line. Maybe humans have no greater love than a willingness to risk sacrifice of their life for that of the planet? From where springs such love and courage? Is it the awareness of our unsustainable culture, the loss of biodiversity, the concern for children, the rights and intrinsic value of other species, or because it makes good economic sense? As Livingston (1981) so powerfully showed, all these reasons to care have not been sufficient. We need a larger matrix of reasons and feelings of nature attachment that relate to our essence, and relate to what humans need to redevelop, if Gaia is to have the commitment of all of our will and passion to care. We need to care from the conviction that our continued diminution of the life of the earth diminishes ourselves and our potential, as well as that of our children and other species. Personal eco-bonding, preferably in early childhood, is a requisite for sustained participation in collective action as an eco-carer (see Thomashow 1995). Then the eco-carer, fired by an inner and outer need to care, will not be sacrificial, but will even have the potential to be enriched by their action.

Eco-psychology for educational practice

There are ways that naturescape works with a person to aid in developmental processes which facilitate deepening one's nature connection. Such techniques begin with simply observing how you feel when in the bush or desert, and taking note of these feelings. We can see attributes of ourselves highlighted in the characteristics of plants, animals and elements (such as the hardness of rocks, the slipperiness of fish, the piercing eyes of an eagle, the persistence of a wombat). Nature heals and teaches us through our encounters with its varied attributes and capacities. A sunset offers an experience of transcendence; a desert storm or pounding sea offers humility in the face of nature's power, or peace in nature's quiet. Awareness of our regeneration through such nature experiences is often vague or taken for granted. But this awareness can be enhanced through an eco-psychologist who focuses one's encounter with nature and facilitates understanding.

In the discipline of psychology, too much responsibility lies in the hands of the professional carer, who is expected to hold the client's projections as they go through their therapeutic journey. While this is important, there are ways to reduce its extent and to mediate the relationship so that participants are more responsible for their journey. This can happen through allowing nature and the group process to do some of the holding. Hence the learning and therapeutic processes become a four-way dialogue between the above players. This dialogue takes time to evolve. It involves a design that makes provision for unfilled niches, and is responsive to the weather and the evolution of the group. With a wider array of resources it is more

likely that participants will be enriched in ways that join them with each of the parties without excessive reliance on any particular one. A difficulty is how to do this in a way that honours eco-psychology's roots with first peoples while recognising where we are now (Watson 1990; Rose 1992).

In this chapter I will describe my eco-psychology course, which encourages this four-way dialogue between carer, client, group and nature. The design of the course involves a variety of approaches. Some are developmental, others operate in parallel. Assessable tasks are designed to formalise experience while providing focus points along the way. This is not a one-on-one approach that puts the focus on the teacher/learner or therapist/client. The approach is more one of facilitating explorations of nature connection in partnership with other players; the facilitator's role is dependent on having been there oneself with a guide.

A small role for lectures

Nature encounters are interspersed with a series of lectures and workshops, largely by guests, that cover topics such as first peoples' experience of nature, eco-hunting, birthing in nature, journeys to a sacred centre and Eastern approaches to an eco-self. They provide a diversity of perspectives for reflecting on humans in nature and are an important part of the intellectual base of the course.

The text I use is Roszak's (1995) edited book: its diversity provides different access points for a wide range of students. The students have to do two book reviews, which are discussed at the retreats and, at the end of the course, they write a review essay on the role of eco-psychology in environmentalism.

Eco-psychology practicals

The private work of the participants begins with the first of three eco-psychology practicals. These practicals involve participants reflecting on their responses in different parts of nature. The aim is for them to be more conscious of themselves in different environments and conscious of what those environments mean to them.

The first practical involves an exploration of self in nature at home. The following abridged participant story is a good illustration:

I wanted to live in a place that I identified with, that would become my place.

The house I found was one of those houses that immediately felt right. It was a happy, contented house. Better still, it had almost no garden, but lots of potential. Two other people moved in with me.

Across the road from the house was a piece of open land adjacent to the railway station. It had a few trees, a Council tractor mowing it once a month,

and that was it. It also had potential.

The first year passed. I started to develop a garden at the house. With some children, I used the land across the road for cricket, and teaching them to ride a bike. I made friends with some of the neighbours. I was happy.

The second year I changed jobs. Every morning and every night, on the way to and from work, I crossed the land across the road. I wondered how I could go about developing it. I talked about it with some of the neighbours that I was getting to know better. The garden around the house grew. I loved it, and thought of it possessively as my garden.

In the third year, a meeting was held [and] a planting group was formed to develop the land across the road. In the following months we met regularly, and slowly the digging and mulching and planting proceeded. Friendships started to form.

Back at the house, I started to add to my garden in a way that reflected the land across the road. More indigenous and less English cottage garden. I felt and rejoiced in my growing sense of attachment to the place.

The fourth, fifth and sixth years saw the land across the road change; it started to look like a tiny scrap of bushland instead of a mowed paddock. My involvement in local area issues grew. My sense of belonging continued to grow.

In the fifth year I came to realise that I didn't own the garden, or any of the trees and flowers that I had planted. I loved them, but they weren't mine.

In the seventh year, this year, I changed jobs again. But I still cross the land across the road, and it never fails to give me a sense of joy. In the irregular layout of the grasses I hear still the discussion and voices that were there at the planting. It has become more truly mine, though I can never own it, than any personal garden will ever be.

The second practical is a report on the participants' experience of themselves in the human-made world, such as on a freeway or in a supermarket, compared with on a bicycle or in a corner store. The focus here is on the role of technology in mediating their environmental experience. The final practical in the course is to explore personal mirrors/learning from nature, which is discussed from my perspective at the end of this chapter. These practicals enable participants to review their everyday taken-for-granted existence in nature. As this existence is taken for granted it is vulnerable to being ignored, abused and not shared or honoured.

Researching nature bonding

The course's more cognitive, systematic investigation focuses on a dialogue between participants' own childhood experiences in nature and those of others (preferably significant others) from different generations. A tentative draft for an interview is provided. This helps to provide structure and distance for a very personal exploration. Key issues to address, irrespective of generation, are:

- nature as threat
- nature as healer/teacher
- nature as playmate, and
- nature as friend/alien.

Students are asked to examine their own early childhood experiences in nature through their parents' and their own eyes. Emphasis is on early memories of where and how they were in nature – the experiences that bonded them with nature and/or those that alienated them from nature. Maybe they did not have any? What does this mean for their capacity to connect now? Are they dependent largely on a cognitive approach, such as knowing that although nature is not in their psyche, they need its support and nature needs their support?

This leads to an exploration of the student's lineage with nature through their family and the places in which they have lived. This ancestral research involves going back through their family history, exploring the social roots of their nature connections, what they have inherited, their 'blood lines' with/against nature. As illustrated by the following abridged participant's story, this involves exploring parents' and grandparents' nature connections.

Portrait of my father

In Preston Dad recalls the times when he and the local boys would play in the parks and the local creek. They used to build bonfires and spend many hours exploring. Dad also spent a lot of time at a farm in Gippsland around the age of 10. For many years he would spend his school holidays at the farm and enjoyed helping to cart the hay and chasing and killing the rabbits which then ended up on the dinner table. Dad remembers playing in the creeks and the dams where they were able to catch yabbies and tadpoles.

My father was transferred to Launceston...where we were surrounded by bush on two sides. Dad loved this location because he could see the mountains in the distance and into the city where the night-time lights seemed to be a bed of twinkling stars. Dad enjoyed taking us into the bush, 'just to be out in the fresh air and look at things in the bush'. I remember it as a fantastic time when Dad would help us build huts in the bush and take us to see lots of different animals. I recall jumping into Dad's arm when we saw a snake on our path and then from a safe distance Dad explaining why it liked to be curled up

in the sun.

...the Gordon River...[has] now been an annual fishing trip for over 25 years. This is my father's special place. There is a sense of total isolation in this place and it provides a time for regeneration of strength and spirit. Dad loves to be on the river and the fishing has become secondary to him, it is the experience of the place that is important now. Being in this place requires a simple way of life where there is less importance placed on the material goods we deem necessary for survival and happiness in city life.

I can reflect now that a great deal of my nature relation has been a result of my parents, in particular my father...My brothers and I all share an awe of nature. Dad takes great delight in showing my son Liam shells, sand, water, sky, birds...NATURE! From watching my father and son I am gaining a greater appreciation for the way that my father has taught me and influenced my relationship with nature. It is a most wonderful and valuable insight to be privy to.

Another arena of research is the exploration of future nature relations (that is, the attitudes and experiences of the next generation). This can be done by interviewing children about their attitudes, feelings and behaviour toward nature. One participant developed a story of welcoming her new baby to the wonders of the earth. Alternatively, participants could write a letter to be opened by their children when they are 18. This letter could discuss the participants' and their parents' nature connections and provide the children with an interesting framework when they are adults in the year 2014.

This research experience has proved an indirect but intimate way for the different generations to explore their interconnections. It can be a way to dissolve long-standing conflict and gives the younger generation a chance to see their parents and grandparents in a new light. Through this research one generation is able to share personal life experiences with another in a way that is less likely to entangle them. When completed, the students share their research within a trio of participants. This provides some comparative reference through which to unravel similarities and differences. It also aids making sense of what has been an intimate encounter. As one participant said, it 'challenged me to talk to Dad about things that would not have been discussed otherwise. It has also been great to articulate what it is that I feel about nature'.

Nature attractions for learning/healing/transcending

Each season and naturescape provides a different opportunity for personal exploration of being in nature. The core of the course is built around two weekend retreats held in powerful naturescapes; one by the sea in autumn, the other in the mountains in winter. Participants organise some of the workshops which, in the past, have included 'art expression through nature', 'creating songlines', 'our body

in nature', 'nature wounds' and 'our shadow side'. At night there may be ritual dancing, drumming, storytelling or a walk.

As course leader, my major intervention during the retreat is the direct exploration of each person's right brain/left field dialogue with nature. This is in order to explore how the student can enrich the power and fullness of who they are and deepen their appreciation of being *in* nature and the being *of* nature. Initially this involves participants spending time in a chosen place for at least an hour, being mindful of their attractions and resistances. They may keep a journal or write poetry. Many find the prospect of an hour alone in one place, being consciously in nature, daunting. They are asked to bring back to the group a sample of what particularly caught their attention. What was it that attracted and repelled them? What did it mean? Maybe there is something in the nature/human dynamic that picks up these under-expressed aspects of self. Whether the resulting image comes from direct channelling or from a dialogue between right brain and the cosmos, stimulated by the nature attraction, is not important. It works, and I can see that it works. The following describes my perception of what actions help or hinder. I have used left brain/right brain language because, as clumsy and dualistic as it is, it does have a biological basis.

Developing a way of working as an eco-psychologist

My way of working evolved out of a two-year apprenticeship with Susan Bechio. It involves being open, trusting nature to provide what is needed and being ready to work with what one is attracted to 'out of left field'. It begins with listening to the story of what the participant was drawn to in nature and asking whether it is out of their right brain/left field. How do we know? There are some indicators (for example, was it unexpected, something they kept coming back to, maybe in spite of their thinking or intentions?). I use attunement to my mix of right brain/left field as the key source for my intervention, whether that is to facilitate students' exploration or to offer my perception.

I use my 'objective' left brain to stick with clarifying the nature of what the student has brought back or seen. The task here is to describe the nature expression as it is, in itself (for example, a leaf or an ant). After the participant has provided this description as clearly as he or she can, the group is then asked to fill out the character and function of the aspect of nature being addressed. While the left side of the brain is busy, the right brain/left field is able to do its work. This can be aided by a phenomenological reduction of one's own projections. Hence I adopt a stance that is as open as possible to the present, such as noting my fear of snakes if an old skin is brought back to the group. I ask what the participants think the nature message is for them.

I then listen to my right brain/left field, while being ever-watchful of my intellect wanting to get into the picture. With compassion I listen for the participants' need. What comes to me? I work to catch the picture, asking myself what I see while

staying with the data of nature and of the person. While holding them together, I listen with openness to what comes from left field for an answer. Part of being able to trust what comes is when it rings bells for the participant. I am watchful of my intellect being smart and going for the shallow, obvious answer. When I do not know, if nothing comes, I say so and leave the void open. I have to keep saying to myself, you do not have to intervene! When something does come, I consider it and ask myself what it is. Holding it there, I work to make it clearer. I use my left brain to make sense of it. I try to sit with it for a moment before sharing it. Then I invite any group member to share possible meanings that suggest themselves before I share what has come to me. This may help to clarify the meaning further. I watch not to over-do this processing. I watch out particularly for projections, since group input can add to confusion. By allowing space for others' suggestions first, I leave them free of my picture of meaning while still having the opportunity to counter perceived projections.

Finally I ask the person to identify what rings true. I offer what I picked up out of my right brain/left field, but do not insist on its rightness. I may well not have got it. Right brain/left field is often initially unclear, a surprise. It sometimes takes a while for the full meaning to emerge. (For example, one of my eco-psychology mentor's interventions for me was to 'look below your knees'. Processing this directive continues to claim my attention.) What comes through may be a straight mirror of who one is, helping to develop more awareness of oneself. I think it is more likely to be a message about something the participant needs to work on to move forward (such as creating more balance in their life, or facing a troublesome pattern that has been highlighted by what they brought back to the group). Because the experience comes out of the right brain/left field, and through nature, it is harder to argue with. It can be powerful and take the form of a revelation. It can be quite upsetting, generating confusion, anxiety and even hostility. As a result, considerable processing and assistance is required (see Johnson 1986).

To monitor my own work, I prefer to share the exercise with at least one other colleague if possible, and to draw on others in the group to assist in creating a climate that invites input from everyone and uncertainty as to anyone's rightness. I am always working on the art of listening for the collective wisdom without being driven by the crowd.

Conclusion

As the city becomes a more and more techno-human world, stripped of other nature, our need for direct nature connections will grow. We have deep psycho/spiritual needs for:

- clarity and certainty as an antidote to the postmodern relativism of the virtual world and the unconstrained subjectivity of the human therapist
- encounters with others that are related to us but are not us and do not care about who we are

- seeing oneself sharply, without the filtering provided by intimate relationships with human others
- reflections of those aspects of oneself that are undiscovered or suppressed
- quiet solicitude with nature that provides space for the ferment within to bubble and find expression
- self-discovery through attraction to, and observation of, particular species' characteristics, and mirroring these back to oneself.

Eco-psychological practice is exploring our human nature through the diversity of what nature offers. It involves being open to oneself and the other while keeping in mind what the nature attraction is and what one's response is. Working with nature directly keeps participants in touch with their roots while they explore difficult and new dimensions of their being. While the burden on the psychologist through drawing on the eco is lessened, the struggle remains to develop a process that holds the individual sufficiently while not taking away from their response-ability. The dynamic between the nature that attracts and the meaning we give can only be subjective. The uncertainty principle needs to be held in the present or else we risk commitment to a false certainty.

It is not that dreams, free association, body analysis, clay expression or the stars do not work, for there are many pathways to the psyche. This is another. An essential difference is the constraint on projections by the character of the nature encountered. The eco comes before the psychology. There is a dialogue between the participant's need and their nature encounter. This affirms being in nature in all senses of our being, and is an experience as much 'out there' as 'in here'. I do love the magic that can occur.

There is the little picture of what you gain for yourself and the bigger picture of being more conscious (through this kind of experience) that, psychologically and spiritually, we are in nature. Eco-psychological practice can be a building block to eco-spirituality. Spirituality needs expression through experience of the truth of the Gaia hypothesis or else spirituality becomes part of the paradigm that takes us away from being within the earth. This has left us vulnerable to our techno/virtual culture, creating a false sense of our power as the earth's god and, as such, no longer capable of listening and learning, other than from ourselves. Spirit *from* place is dependent on knowing and keeping our place in nature.

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