

Come Home to Your Wild Heart

Mary Good

Holos Institute, San Francisco, California.

An Interweaving of Personal Narrative With Professional Vision for Applied Ecopsychology

I parked my car in a dusty lot on the far side of the Ecology Trail in the Presidio and began taking items out of my backpack. Laptop, scheduler, and cell phone all hit the floor unceremoniously, and I felt that triumphant satisfaction of a 21st-century human, escaping the shackles of technology's chain gang. I would bring only the necessities. Camera. Notebook. Grumbling in realization that I didn't bring a pen, I sifted through the detritus in the back seat, a foot deep from the four year old. Still no pen. I ditched the notebook and reluctantly took on the idea that I wouldn't be writing today. Inspired to write an essay on my "New or Renewed Vision" for *Ecopsychology*, I had gone as far as I could, sitting in front of the computer, and it was time to take my questions to the land. This spot in nature is my co-therapist, and while I have many favorite settings for outdoor therapy sessions, my weekly appointment in this particular place holds my heart in a sweet relationship of near and dear.

I walked a few steps away from the car and waited, listening. To my far right I heard the call. *Kyeer!* Northern flickers were calling to each other across an open field. High above in a stand of eucalyptus, I heard the territorial squeakings of hummingbirds. Following the sound with my eyes, I found what I expected. A large Cooper's hawk perched on a bare limb, three hummers dive-bombing like mosquitoes around his head. I had gone less than 10 yards from the car, and already I was overcome with the satisfaction of interconnection. My hunger pangs for encountering The Other are a constant in my daily baseline. This hunger is insatiable, like the need for breath, an open prescription. Yet every time, I am surprised at the shift in my entire being when I rediscover my connection. Internal chatter begins to cease, senses come alive, and cognitive functioning switches over to the still, small voice. *Kyeer!* Two flickers flew overhead, three ravens chased a (different) Cooper's hawk, a Say's phoebe flew down and caught a fly in midair, hovering. I stalked the flickers for a short

lifetime; then with a jolt, I mentally poked at myself. The essay! Get on it!

I thought of the journal's intention to include more scientific method, to "embrace our totemic self and to integrate that with our scientific culture and technological self" (Kahn, 2013, p. 164). I enjoy straddling the threshold between intuition and science, and my inner ecologist can get on board with better substantiated empirical findings on the positive psychological merits of time spent in nature. Especially in regard to wild and diverse nature, new studies might lead to protection of these places. I also appreciated the statement "That doesn't mean we don't critique science and technology in the process or seek to understand how our adapting to technologies can undermine human flourishing" (Kahn, 2013, p. 164). My own vision in ecopsychology is to rewild the human psyche, to release it from the damaging aspects of too much "civilization." Because my clients are often refugees from a paradigm that seeks to belittle their emotional experience, especially as it relates to nonhuman others (including whole ecosystems or a planet), my vision for ecopsychology can welcome more empirical studies, while my personal style and perspective as an ecopsychologist will always lean toward giving a voice to the nonlinear, sensory-based, untamed part of the soul. A quote by Derrick Jensen comes to mind, "Perceiving the world as 'it is', is also to misperceive it entirely, to blind ourselves to an even greater body of truth" (2000, p. 311). Too often science, especially in regard to mental health, rests in the easy chair of biological reductionism. Instead, I get excited about cutting-edge science that can help promote the "validity" of the mind-body connection (for instance, by further study into the "brain in the gut" with neurogastroenterology). Since interconnection with nature is often felt in the body (and easily argued away with rationality), getting science to work subversively on our cultural Cartesian skepticism may be key.

From over my left shoulder a familiar American kestrel swooped by on its curved wings. I watched it land in a tree adorned with gray lichen, a favorite perch. I followed, but just as I approached good visual distance, a dog walker frightened it away to a farther spot. I sat down beneath its tree, disappointed. Two scrub jays broke out in alarm calls, dancing below the kestrel in their denim blazers, challenging, *What? What? What?* I took the yoke of the digital camera off

my neck and acquiesced to the moment. No writing today. No photos either.

Letting myself melt into the landscape, wildlife activity resumed. The white-crowned sparrows commented on my presence with comfortable pips. Settling deeper into myself, I rested upon an old stone, with grief as soft as moss, and exhaled with the core truth that brings me to this work. *I love this Earth*. Even though my specialization in ecopsychology was born out of a synthesis of my “outside” environmental interests and a desire to be of service, it is no longer the peg I can hang my hat on at the end of the day. There is no “coming home” from work, feeling satisfied that I have invested myself in the endeavor of connecting people with nature (and thereby potentially healing both). Working as an ecopsychologist has become an expression of a life with one theme. To turn the boat around before it goes over the waterfall, or at least to show up as a fully present and compassionate witness to the death of much that I hold dear. Our home on this Earth is as tenuous as that of other species on the brink of extinction, and if I had one call out to the world it would be *All hands on deck!* Radical ecopsychology? Yes. One-on-one psychological healing through wholism? Yes. Ecotherapy, holistic health, conservation advocacy, permaculture, sustainable energy innovation? Yes. Welcoming in and encouraging people of color and also working with disenfranchised communities and victims of environmental racism? Yes, especially that. All of it. Now. It doesn't need to be this or that but rather both/and. Ecopsychology can retain diversity within its ranks while having sharp theoretical guidelines, be politicized or not by practitioners, and still remain a clear voice in a chorus of allies.

Truly, ecopsychology counteracts the idea of the “well-adjusted person” in traditional Western psychology, as one who cohabitates “normally” in an ecologically broken world. If there is one grand statement I would make for a new vision of ecopsychology, it would be to question its position as a niche. Our planet, and the well-being of all life on it, is in dire straits. Rather than splitting hairs over a definition, I would like to proclaim all movement forward in our field as that of restoring biophilia, as necessary for the survival of our species and the host system we live within. Let's do this by any and all means possible. *All hands on deck!*

This urban oasis in the Presidio of San Francisco shines as a model for the success of rehabilitating wild spaces. A creek, once imprisoned in a

storm drain, has been daylighted and is fed by the happy burbling of El Polin Spring. In early summer, the surrounding hills are covered with tidy tips, goldfields, and poppies that create hiding places for the rare and fragile Presidio clarkia. Just a few months ago in August, the old willow was surrounded with the pink blooms of the *Epilobium*, and all throughout the year, birdsong in local and migrating dialects weaves the web of life back together. I bring clients here, and with little explanation, their reaction is often the same...If this land can heal, so can I. If wildness will return to land abused, even after all humanity has done, then perhaps there is hope for me too. Perhaps there is hope for us all.

Kyeer! The flickers were behind me now, and their piercing call pulled me along a beaded string of visceral memories. I walked back to the car, traversing two worlds as fragmented parts re-membered. I stood in the orchard of my childhood home, wondering at this extraordinary bird with a half moon on its breast. As we watched each other from a distance of three feet, calm and curious, I connected to an innate sense of belonging on this Earth. Wild spaces “out there” must be protected, but I am even more interested in bringing wilderness back home, into our mundane lives, rewilding our communities, relationships, and souls. As the open landscape invites the psyche to unravel, clients realize the elasticity of their capacity to hold their experience. Grief, rage, and fear of death are given allowance, and the resulting emotional rebirth reunites clients with what they have always known...the natural orientation of the heart toward soft, tender joy.

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Address correspondence to:
 Mary Good
 310 3rd Ave.
 San Francisco, CA 94118

E-mail: terrallecualism@gmail.com

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