

Nature Dreaming: Depth Psychology and Ecology

by Stephen Aizenstat, Ph.D.

Nature is always dreaming, unfolding herself in each moment. We, also, dream—each day imagining ourselves into our own inner nature. In the meeting place between natures, a window opens, and we are deeply touched. We remember, for a time, our psychic inheritance, an endowment rooted most essentially in the rhythms of nature.

Human beings would do well to consider the repercussions of exterminating authentic wildlife on planet Earth. The loss of natural resources, of numerous species, of undeveloped land, of natural homes for indigenous animals has been well-documented. Many persons have devoted their lives to preserving the integrity of Earth, and yet the years go by, and mostly the news becomes more alarming. I am deeply saddened to realize that my children may not be able to receive their multi-billion-year inheritance of a world sourced by natural wonders.

As the human species charges on, irreparably damaging our own ecosystem, we create evermore ingenious ways to avoid confronting this reality. We escape to the inside—into our enclosed shopping malls with programmed sound and conditioned air, into our domed stadiums with artificial grass and fluorescent light, into our interior selves with self-absorbed fascination for “me.” We escape to the outside—out to an amusement park for vacation or out of ourselves to a “virtual reality” of our own making and of our own liking. To retreat inside or get away outside avoids the necessary head-on confrontation with the problem of here-and-now. Avoiding our relationship with nature rushes the inevitable: the death of the natural world. To face the challenge anew we need, yet again, to hear the question: “What is being asked of us now?”

I remember that, as a boy, I was deeply nourished by the wilderness. I felt comforted by the land, engaged by the animals, touched by the sky, the stones, the canyons, the rivers. Today, I am aware of how the natural world informs my work as a Depth Psychologist. I believe I am being asked to tend the psychic relationships that exist between the creatures and things of our world, to facilitate, in particular, interaction between the psyche of nature and the human psyche. That is the task, the call. Only when there is communication between human beings and the creatures and things of the world, will human institutions be responsive to the beauty and

splendor that is nature's dream. I believe Depth Psychology has a pivotal and, as yet, unexercised role to play in helping to preserve our natural world.

Through the lens of Depth Psychology, I have discovered that human behavior is rooted most deeply in nature's intentions—that our actions are fundamentally expressions of nature's desire. The rhythms of nature underpin all of human interaction: religious traditions, economic systems, cultural and political organization. When these human forms betray the natural psychic pulse, people and societies get sick; nature is exploited; and entire species are threatened.

Perhaps Depth Psychologists today are being asked to act in the personal and the collective world as naturalists might—naturalists of the inner and outer psyche, witnessing and responding to our relationship with our environment. Perhaps what is being asked of us now is to create an alignment between natures, between souls in persons and soul in the world, a correspondence necessary for the health of all who live on planet Earth.

THE TRADITION OF DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

The field of Depth Psychology focuses on bringing conscious reflection to psychic processes, attending particularly to the unconscious. “Depth” refers to an imagined direction—down, behind, underneath. As a method of inquiry, its primary access to the psychic depths is the dream. The two major schools of Depth Psychological thought are Freudian and Jungian. Both perspectives seek to “uncover” (Freud) or “make conscious” (Jung) the inner unconscious life of the psyche. However, in their attempts to work the inner psychic landscape, both have placed emphasis on the human psyche, without giving much attention to the psyche of the world.

Freud postulated the “Personal Unconscious,” the container of one's personal psychological history. The contents of the Personal Unconscious include instinctual drives, such as sexuality and aggression, as well as memories of personal experiences that have been forgotten or repressed. Freudians understand dreams as reflections of the content of the Personal Unconscious and, therefore, of the dreamer's previously experienced personal life circumstances.

Jung went beyond the notion of the Personal Unconscious, with its focus on the individual psyche, and offered the possibility of a broader, shared human psyche that he called the “Collective Unconscious.” The Collective Unconscious is made up of universal psychological forms known as archetypes. The term “archetypes” refers to psychological patterns that appear throughout human experience and can be seen in the motifs of age-old myths, legends, and fairy tales found in every culture throughout the history of the human species. Archetypes, the symbolic forms of the unconscious, can also be seen in the imagery of the dream. Examples of archetypes are “the wise old man/woman,” “the tree of life,” “the journey,” “home.”

Both Freud and Jung, in their extraordinary investigations of intra-psychic reality, emphasized the psychology of the human experience. This emphasis also extended to their systems of dream work. Freud's primary interest was the interpretation of the dream image back to the developmental stages of the Personal Unconscious; while Jung's emphasis was on consideration of the dream in terms of the archetypal patterns of the Collective Unconscious. The approach to the dream, in each instance, was intended to explore psychic life as it related to the experience of the individual.

It is important to note, however, that Jung, in other areas of his work, reached toward the psyches of phenomena of the world. He believed the central archetype, "the Self," had a universal quality, imagined as extending beyond the personal-particular. Also, when discussing the psychological concept of "synchronicity" (meaningful coincidences of outer and inner events), and the idea of the psychoid phenomenon (the notion that at a certain level the archetype exists in both psychic and physical states), Jung referred to the relationship between the inner human experience and the phenomena in the world. Unfortunately, from my perspective even though Jung broadened his work toward this more inclusive vision of psychological life, contemporary Jungian psychological practice continues to center almost exclusively on the consideration of the human psyche (personal and/or collective)—attending to persona, developing relationship to anima/animus, realizing the presence of shadow influences, and making conscious the unconscious process of individuation.

DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHE IN THE WORLD

While both Freud and Jung developed intricate systems of psychological thought, neither brought particular emphasis to the inter-connectedness between human experience and the creatures and things of our world. I believe the task of Depth Psychology today is to extend the work of Freud and Jung to include consideration of the psyche of nonhuman experience. This more inclusive understanding of psychic reality is currently being explored by a new generation of Depth Psychologists, including James Hillman, Robert Sardello, Robert Romanyshyn, Mary Watkins, and myself, among others. Our broader view of Depth Psychology includes the psychic realities of all phenomena, emphasizing the part of the Depth Psychological tradition which honors psyche in the world. In my work in this area, I have come to call this more inclusive eco-psychological realm of psyche the "World Unconscious."

The World Unconscious is a deeper and wider dimension of the psyche than that of the Personal or the Collective Unconscious. In the realm of the World Unconscious, all creatures and things of the world are understood as interrelated and interconnected. Although there are clear differences in orders of complexity, I make the assumption that all the phenomena in the world possess intrinsic unconscious characteristics—subjective inner natures. I use the term "unconscious" realizing that, for the most part, it is we who are unconscious of these inner

natures of the world's other inhabitants. These inner natures of the world's organic and inorganic phenomena make up the World Unconscious.

At the dimension of the World Unconscious, the inner subjective natures of the world's beings are experienced as dream images in the human psyche. In addition, I believe dream images are real, have imaginal weight and body, and act in dreams on behalf of themselves. For example, the elephant that appeared in my dream last night was fully engaged in his activity, not mine. In the dream, I watched as he looked intently at me with shiny black eyes and wide flopping ears. He used his trunk to spray dirt and tiny rocks over his fine-haired rump, his tail all the while swatting flies from his sagging hind quarters. After a time he plodded back to join the rest of the herd. . . . This dream elephant, like all dream images, is alive, has body, and moves about according to his own inner nature.

This idea that all phenomena in the world possess subjective inner natures must be distinguished from the egocentric concepts of: anthropomorphism (attributing human qualities to nonhuman forms of life), animism (humans attributing living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena), and personification (attributing personal characteristics to phenomena in the world). Rather, the idea that all beings are ensouled, in and of themselves, locates the life spark in the entity, outside of personal human psychic ownership. In this wider view the human experience exists in a field of psychic relationships, one among the many. Seen through the "eyes" of the World Unconscious, the dream image is an independent presence in a broader psychic ecology, a dreamscape where there is room for many beings to "walk around" and be regarded by one another. The elephant that appeared in "my" dream had a life of its own; it visited to interact with me as a fellow creature of the dreamtime—perhaps to heighten my awareness of the plight of elephant in the world. From the perspective of the World Unconscious, the dreamscape is the worldscape.

The new generation of Depth Psychologists is taking this wider view of psychic life into consideration and opening to a reality in which all creatures and things are animated by psyche. This change in orientation requires a move beyond the personal-particular, human psyche into an active psychological relationship with the other species and things on our Earth. Our traditional focus on the relationship between ego and Self, with its emphasis on the individual person or culture, is expanding to include contemplation of Self and world. From the perspective of the World Unconscious everything in our world has psychic depth and is dreaming—animate and inanimate, human-made and nonhuman-made. Even such things as buildings and tables were first imagined, then constructed out of the dream that moves through us. Dreams, the hallowed windows into the depth of the human psyche, now also provide access to the inner life, the soul, of the creatures and things of our world. Working with dreams, the Depth Psychologist helps cultivate the capacity to hear, from the inside, the voices of those species and objects who help shape our experience, source our imagination . . . and who are in need of us.

Another way to hear these voices is to discover, or rediscover, that part of the natural world which most authentically sources our individual areas of expertise. The aviator, for example, can find the likeness in nature that feeds his yearning to fly. Perhaps the flight of wild geese is the model for this age-old imperative to take to the skies. Similarly, the engineer can remember how her craft is patterned after activities found in the natural landscape—how she is inspired by the ingenuity of so many of nature’s creatures who engage daily in the work of planning and construction. Consider the beaver, the termite, the mud swallow.

Underpinning the creative process of human invention are the archetypal patterns of the natural world. As individuals and as professional people, we are called to rediscover the elemental forces that give form to, are generative of, our vocational expression. Once these connections are rediscovered, each person will know, in a deep and essential way, what part of the restoration of the natural world s/he has access to and what part s/he is responsible for preserving.

What would result is a heartfelt empathy between the correspondent creatures and systems in the ecosphere. Imagine a world in which: carpenter knows beaver; lawyer knows eagle; philosopher knows the silence of the deep night. With this connection between human consciousness and the natural world re-established, people will feel compelled to make the journey back, back to the source in nature which inspires their work and teaches what contribution is asked in return.

THE DEPTH PSYCHOLOGICAL ADVOCACY

Again, “What is being asked of us now?” In order to build a respectful and sustaining relationship with the world, we must first recover a sensibility that is informed by the psyche of nature, an awareness that our essential psychological spontaneities are rooted most deeply in the psyche of the natural world. We are born out of the rhythms of nature and to destroy nature’s psyche is, ultimately, to end our own. The responsibility of the Depth Psychologist is advocacy on behalf of all who share our world. There are at least four general areas in which the Depth Psychologist can play a significant role.

1. Depth Psychology can contribute new knowledge to the contemporary field of applied psychology. The guiding question is: “What would a psychology look like that is based on a ecocentric world view rather than an egocentric orientation?” An eco-psychological perspective would demand additions to established notions about psyche, projection, pathology, treatment. From an eco-psychological point of view, for example, the concept of projection might be seen as working the other way around—with human life carrying the projections and personifications of the soul that reside in the creatures and things of the world. The activity of projection would be imagined as occurring in an inter-subjective field which includes the phenomena in the world—a field in which an object, plant, or animal could project its particular subjectivity onto us. Pathology, too, would be resituated in a wider eco-psychological perspective. Depression, for instance, could be a natural response to the manic condition of the world. Another possibility is to revision depression as “ingression,” a time of turning inward. As an adjunct to more traditional therapeutic approaches focused on “getting over depression,” or “fixing depression,” a person could be encouraged to imagine a soul journey through a winter landscape, finding solace and new possibilities in nature’s season of silence. Once “placed” in a psychic landscape mirroring the natural world, an individual feels located in “a place to be,” capable of receiving what nature has to offer.
2. Depth Psychology’s research methodologies, particularly phenomenological approaches, can be utilized to explore how the human being interacts with the “voices” of others who share the earth. A sustained investigation of inner psychic processes, such as dreams, visions, and affective states would be explored and listened to from an ecocentric perspective. In exploring these receptive, non-verbal states, the researcher would learn to differentiate without separating self from world. In fact, the state of mind one brings to the world very much determines what one experiences of the world. Cultivating different ways of listening would foster the ability to hear the diversity of non-human phenomena. Special care would be taken to listen in ways that allow the voices of earth’s inhabitants to be heard in the full range of their sound.

3. Depth Psychologists would advocate that because the ills of our world are inextricably tied to our personal pathology, psychotherapy must be conducted in a context that considers one's relationship to the plight of the world. To this end, Depth Psychologists can work with the American Psychological Association (A.P.A.) and the American Medical Association (A.M.A.) to articulate our conviction that the suffering in the world is reflected in, and interactive with, the suffering of human beings. The time has come to move beyond the widely-held belief that psychological health is solely a function of individual wholeness and nurturing human relationships. Although this view has obvious therapeutic usefulness, it exists within a framework that perpetuates the separation of person from world and denies the essential importance of an individual's surroundings. As Depth Psychologists, we must advocate a re-imagining of psychopathology that takes into account the other presences in our world.

4. Depth Psychology, with an eco-psychological emphasis, would contend, also, that physiological illness is connected to our damaged relationship to nature. Our alienation from the rhythms of the natural world contribute, in a direct way, to our physical suffering. For example, a therapist working from an Depth Psychological perspective would recognize that for a person struggling with cancer, it is life-affirming to find a way back to nature's rhythms. From an ecocentric point of view the goal is not to imagine the cancer as an entirely alien force to be eradicated at any cost (like the weeds in the garden requiring ever more pesticides), but rather, to see the cancer as one part of nature's ecology. From the perspective of the psyche of nature, cancer, too, has an important role to play. Yes, it has the capacity to make us suffer in horrible ways, even kill us; nevertheless, when viewed as one of nature's processes, cancer can be re-imagined in a manner that acknowledges and respects its intended function. From a Depth Psychological point of view the goal is not to "get rid" of cancer in order to sustain life in service of a tenacious ego. Rather, this condition is re-experienced in relationship to the principles of nature—where health and disease, life and death are related parts of a continuing cycle. When cancer, and death, are seen as part of nature's design, both are given a sense of place. We do not work so hard resisting, at all costs, the "alien intrusion" of disease or denying the existence of life's other side, death. Once we are resituated in this wider, ever-transforming ecology of nature, we reconnect with the natural resource and the rhythm that live inside of us. Realignment with nature's harmonic provides a potent complement to well-considered medical care.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As an individual and a Depth Psychologist, I am mindful of the psyche that lives in nature. My study of psychology is rooted in the consideration of psyche's nature, a nature evolving most fundamentally out of the organic life processes of the natural world. Nature's diversity keeps the human imagination alive, the creative processes animated, the tolerance for difference possible.

When the Depth Psychologist turns to the question, "What is being asked of us now?" s/he remembers what sources psyche. S/he remembers that the human psyche moves to the rhythm of nature. Depth Psychology has an opportunity to make a serious inquiry into these essential rhythms. We are a tradition founded on the study of the dreams of persons. I believe we must also attend to nature's dreaming. It is now time to broaden our concerns, to listen to the dreams of nature—nature's needs, nature's wisdom, nature's longing.* * *

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