

# The Ecology of the Unconscious

Margaret Kerr & David Key

2010

===

## Abstract

This essay explores the relationships between physical matter and the unconscious mind. We propose that facilitated wilderness experiences can allow unconscious material to be brought to consciousness. This process is congruent with traditional approaches to psychotherapy and leads to psychological healing. However, it not only leads to personal healing but also to ecological healing - by motivating individuals to live more ecologically sustainable lives.

We present data here from the first person - the authors' own journal entries; from the second person - a representative case study from a client; and from the third person - accounts from the psychological and mythopoetic literature. From this, we triangulate and ground a theoretical basis to support 'wilderness work'.

We find that the physical material of wild places can occupy the same reality as the unconscious mind. Further, that experiences of this reality can arise spontaneously, as well as be facilitated deliberately. Our findings are congruent with transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology, and find philosophical and theoretical bases with the Deep Ecology Movement and Transpersonal Ecology.

This work provides a new ecological context for well rehearsed and evidenced modalities in transpersonal psychology. It also provides a potential starting point for further research of the processes we describe. We also hope that it offers a map which will be of practical value to individuals or organisations seeking to facilitate human and ecological wellbeing.

===

## Introduction

*'The sun shines not on us, but in us. The rivers flow not past us but through us.'*

**John Muir (1911)**

From many years of professional practice leading groups, it is obvious that taking people into wild areas can improve their psychological health. This is now well supported by research (e.g. Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; MIND 2007). Of particular importance to our work, other research also suggests that these experiences can lead to 'pro-environmental behaviour' (e.g. Palmer & Suggate *et al*, 1998; WWF, 2009). Our intention in this chapter is not to build on this research, but to offer a deeper understanding of how experiences of wild and green spaces can heal the self as part of our larger ecology.

We believe that at the heart of this healing process is our capacity to open up both *ecologically*, as we become aware of our biological interdependence with the rest of nature and *metaphysically*, as we go beyond our narrow egoic sense of self. Metaphysical opening is the main process explored by Transpersonal

Psychology, and in that sense, our work is transpersonal. In emphasising interrelatedness and immanence, our practice is aligned with feminist (Wright, 1998) and 'descending' strands of transpersonal theory (eg. Washburn, 1995; Jung, 2002) rather than with the hierarchical 'ascending' perspective of Wilber (Daniels, 2005). It is also informed by Taoist and Buddhist approaches (Prendergast, 2003; Preece, 2009; Watts & Huang, 1975) and the shamanic practices and worldviews of historical and indigenous cultures (e.g. Brody, 2002; Celi and Boiero, 2002; Siri, 1998; Williams, 2007).

Some transpersonal psychologists have explicitly acknowledged the connection between transpersonal experience and ecological awareness. For example Stanislav Grof (1996) writes:

*'Transpersonal experiences of psychological death and rebirth and of oneness with other people, with nature, with the entire universe, and with cosmic consciousness, can drastically reduce the level of aggression, increase compassion and tolerance, and automatically lead to high ecological awareness.'* (p63)

However, traditionally, much of Transpersonal Psychology has been centred on the human metaphysical realm and so to make sense of our experiences, we need a wider theoretical frame. This is provided by Deep Ecology, a social movement which emerged in response to growing evidence of our ecological situation (Naess, 1973), and the rich domains of Transpersonal Ecology (Fox, 1990) and Ecopsychology. (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995) These disciplines present a model of a transpersonal Self<sup>1</sup> that is part of the entire body of the Earth, both physically and metaphysically. This is especially clear through the notion of the 'ecological Self' which aligns our psychological sense of *who* we are with the biological reality of *what* we are (Naess, 1986).

We use these diverse theoretical perspectives as a framework to facilitate journeys into wilderness areas. In essence, we lead people on a healing 'descent' into the wild territory where personal and planetary health become synonymous. It is in this ground that we find a more complete, ecological, sense of Self. As David Abram (1996, p69) suggests,

*'It may be that the new 'environmental ethic' toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire... will come into existence... through... a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us.'*

When we feel healed as part of nature, the motivation to live in more ecologically sustainable ways emerges spontaneously. Traditional ethics, which create a moral obligation to act out of duty, become obsolete. Instead, we act as part of nature protecting itself. As Arne Naess so clearly puts it,

*'If reality is as it is experienced by the ecological Self, our behaviour naturally and beautifully follows strict norms of environmental ethics' (ibid, p236).*

## Wilderness as Unconscious Space

The model of the ecological Self suggests that we are deeply woven into a complex web of physical and metaphysical relationships. We are constantly in this web. We are in it now as we write, you are in it now as you read. With each moment, the pattern of the web changes, shifting our experience of 'now'. Sometimes the

---

1. We have used the capitalised form of the words 'Self' and 'Being' to indicate a wide, interconnected, open transpersonal sense. This is in contrast to experiences of 'skin-bound' self or being, which are centred on the personal ego.

shift is small, sometimes it is cataclysmic and life changing. The web's pattern is a gestalt - an arrangement of elements where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Being in this web is called, by Naess (1989), 'gestalt ontology'. In gestalt ontology, not only is the whole greater than the sum of its parts, but each part is experientially greater as a result of the whole. For example, a tree in a wild indigenous forest offers us a different experience from that of a tree in a city street. While the tree could be essentially the same, its context changes our experience of it. Often we are unaware of the additional qualities that come with being part of a gestalt, but, if we are sensitive to them, even a mundane situation can be deeply affective.

Experiences in gestalt ontology are 'nondual' because they go beyond our habitual perceptions of self and other as separate. They are beyond, or perhaps before dualism, in the 'forestructure' of reality (Heidegger, 1962). We often try to abstract them into dualistic forms, for example, through language (Abram, 1996). But the map is not the territory - or, as the Zen teacher, D.T. Suzuki (1969) wrote '*A finger is needed to point at the moon, but what a calamity it would be if one took the finger for the moon!*' (p74). The nondual nature of gestalt ontology takes us beyond language - deep into the realm of Being<sup>1</sup>.

Experiences of gestalten cannot be proven by 'scientific' methods which rely on a dualistic paradigm; they do not have to be understood logically - although they are sometimes shared and therefore can be 'validated' as a consensual or intersubjective reality (Husserl, McCormick & Elliston, 1981; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). But what's more important than the 'truth' of these experiences is their outcome - they have personal and social meaning that can be translated into everyday life. They have gravitas. And they form a nucleus which can attract new personal behaviours.

As the most complete or 'whole' ecological gestalts on Earth, wilderness areas provide experiences of our primordial home. The term 'wilderness', itself, is much-contested. It was made popular through the Wilderness Act passed by US Congress in 1964, which defined it as '*an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain*' (sic). Under this definition, wilderness is an ecological impossibility - a socially constructed idea which separates humans from the rest of nature (Haluzá-Delay, 2001). Humans have been co-evolving on Earth - along with all beings - since the beginning of time, so wilderness is not simply a geographical area '*un-trammelled by man*' (sic).

For us, wilderness describes places where we can experience 'wildness' - our self as part of the 'primordial gestalt'. Being part of that wild pattern changes our sense of self. 'I' as a 'part' becomes different because of the whole. Previously frozen self-constructs can start to thaw, and the possibility of transformation and greater authenticity naturally arises. It is here that we can experience a wider, deeper, reality where phenomena that we have never encountered before emerge and present themselves to our conscious mind. Our journey into wilderness becomes a journey into the unconscious (for example see Snyder, 1990).

The idea of the unconscious was first recorded over 2000 years ago in the Upanishads, and forms the cornerstone of many psychological modalities (Margetts, 1953). The personal unconscious contains elements particular to each individual, whereas the collective unconscious is an immense store of psychological material shared by all of humanity and, we believe, beyond (Daniels, 2005). Under favourable conditions, we can experience a therapeutic opening to both the personal and the collective unconscious: new seeds of meaning are planted and take root, deepening our compassion and understanding. Less afraid, and more aware, we are free to become our true selves. Experiences of wilderness can provide the conditions for this process to unfold.

In the rest of this chapter, we explore our own wilderness experiences: of self opening out to a wider reality, of encounters with the unconscious, and - within the vast 'primordial gestalt' - ultimately of healing the ecological Self. We also explore how, in wilderness, the metaphysical and the physical may become inseparable. While our own stories are the touchstones of our work, tales like ours are common - shared by the groups we have facilitated and throughout human history across many cultures (for example see Campbell, 1949). To maintain their confidentiality, we have chosen to not draw upon the many unpublished stories told to us by the people we work with (although we do refer to one client's published story). At the same time, we recognise it is important to put our own experiences into a wider context, and to do this we will explore the writings of others.

## Opening out

*'As I was sitting beside the fire on the shore of Loch Ericht on Saturday night, a feeling of something about my dad came up. It was scary, like a faint echo – an association triggered off by something in the place we were camping, a sound, the smell of the mosquito coil – I don't know what. As I let it come more, I realised it was to do with my dad's experiences in the war – the unspoken fear that had been around as long as I can remember.*

*I could feel myself starting to contract and become isolated. I talked to J about it as best I could. It eased a little, but it was really compacted – and too early to find words for it. The next day, the feeling was still there, and the first five or six hours were a real struggle, physically and mentally. But as the day unfolded, the feeling – and that part of me – started to open into the landscape. Like it was dispersing into something much more spacious. I started to become part of the vast wild place around me....and my whole self could relax and open up into this. And it felt like coming home.'* (Kerr, 2010, 2009)

This experience shows how being in a wide open wild place can help us open out to unconscious parts of ourselves - things from our personal past that are locked away, or things we are carrying for other people. Christopher Bache (1981), describes how a similar opening happens in Zen meditation:

*'The techniques which eventually dissolve the barrier between self and other also dissolve, along the way, the barrier between conscious and unconscious personality... It is as though the experience of 'relatedness' at levels of consciousness more comprehensive than the ego, actually facilitates the emergence of various unconscious fragments of ego-unrelatedness.'* (p349)

Ultimately this allows split-off, scary, shameful, helpless or grief-stricken parts of the psyche to be compassionately held in something much bigger than self. Prendergast (2003) describes how a similar kind of opening can happen in a deeply attentive therapeutic relationship - he calls this experience 'sacred mirroring'. This nondual state arises when client and therapist consciously engage with silent, unconditional presence; open and receptive to each other's Being. This experience *'often evokes the sensation of a vast space'*, and for some clients, this can simply be liberating - an experience of interconnectedness, wholeness and homecoming. However, commonly, the initial encounter with the vastness is terrifying - a fear of losing all reference points; a fear of falling infinitely. Often in this type of encounter, unprocessed emotions and needs from early life emerge. Resistance to relaxing and letting go into this space shows up as bodily contraction, fear of loss and ultimately, fear of annihilation. As Prendergast notes, *'it is not uncommon for clients to experience the vastness as alternatively [sic] terrifying and comforting, often in rapid succession'*.

However, if clients can tolerate this upheaval, *'their experience over time takes on a positive valence and the vastness is increasingly welcomed as their true ground.'* (Prendergast, 2003 p 104; Washburn, 1995).

Prendergast describes opening to the vast ground of Being as a process that happens in the relationship between two people. It is perhaps a common assumption of psychotherapy that the relationship between people is the primary crucible where psychological wounds can be healed. However, for millions of years we have been held in our early life not only by our biological human family, but also by the whole gestalt of plants, land, trees, rivers, earth and creatures. In the beginning, the void was a fertile void. And so, when we got cut off from this gestalt by the 'evolution' of our culture, the void became sterile, and a vital part of that holding environment was lost. It then all became the responsibility of whatever human being was there in the role of Mother. Psychotherapy has tended to focus on early relational wounds between people, which we try to heal in the therapeutic relationship - and often this works. But we would suggest that this healing is incomplete, because there still remains the primal deficit of the whole wild gestalt.

In the same way that sitting silently open to another human being can be initially terrifying, silent unmediated contact with wilderness can also be very frightening until we get used to it. So much so, that we often tend to avoid it. We are not used to that kind of contact in our culture. Separated from our original natural gestalt, we may sense that something is missing. But we project our inner deficit onto the wilderness, and experience it as a vast, frightening emptiness. We try, in vain, to fill the emptiness with mass media, celebrity culture, consumerism, alcohol and drugs. We have become afraid of the fertile darkness. And, as a culture, our fear is threatening to destroy the ecological ground that sustains us.

Unconditional presence, in wilderness, or with another human being, brings us right up against the terror, power and love which is in Being. But Being in our original gestalt of plants, land, trees, rivers, earth, creatures... we can slowly relax, and then be held - and we feel the echo of that wider, ancient holding environment, which can help dissipate the terror and allow the power and the love to emerge. We are at once held in the mind of nature, and in nature's physical body. This is not to idealise nature as the perfect parent; rather it is to say that the depth of intimacy engendered by this kind of work allows us eventually, to drop through the veil of our projections. It allows us to relax and expand into something beyond the fear that creates dualisms of 'good' and 'bad' parent, 'good' and 'bad' self, and 'good' and 'bad' nature.

Richard Tarnas (1998) relates a story told by Joseph Campbell, which suggests that this understanding has been known for a long time:

*'Rasmussen, who was exploring the northern part of the North American continent, had conversations with a number of old shamans. One of them told the story of his own initiation as a young boy. He said that he was taken by an older shaman out on a sled over ice, and placed in a small igloo just big enough for him to sit in. He was crouched on a skin, he was left there for thirty days with just a little water and meat brought in occasionally during that period. He said, "I died a number of times during those thirty days, but I learned and found what can be found and learned only in the silence, away from the multitude, in the depths. I heard the voice of nature itself speak to me, and it spoke with the voice of a gentle motherly solicitude and affection. Or it sounded sometimes like children's voices, or sometimes like falling snow, and what it said was, 'Do not be afraid of the universe'." This discovery, Campbell goes on, became a point of internal, absolute security for the initiate, and made possible his return to his community with a wisdom and assurance that was unmatched by everyone there, so that he could help others from that inner place.'*

We would suggest that the most complete setting for us to encounter and heal our psychological wounds combines an accepting, holding, human presence with wild nature. This context is the most 'ecologically valid', in that it has predominated in human societies for millions of years, before the relatively recent advent of our current civilisation. It is also ecologically valid, in that the way of Being that emerges from this ultimately healing encounter with the 'vastness' can lead to pro-environmental behaviour by activating a personal realisation of the ecological Self (Naess, 1988; WWF, 2009). Like the initiate in Campbell's story, time in the wilderness can equip us to return to our communities and take compassionate action from an increased sense of inner security, born of ecological Self confidence.

Opening to a wider sense of self in wilderness then, can offer great potential for healing. However, this opening can also be a powerful and sometimes painful experience in which unconscious contents emerge in a variety of forms. This is a delicate process. To work with it sensitively we need to have insight - to hold a steady course through these experiences, moving with the ebb and flow of trauma and breakthrough around us. Knowing the nature of the journey enables us to stay present, to witness and hold these experiences compassionately in ourselves, and with our clients. To illustrate this process we turn next to some of our own experiences.

## Individual, Collective & Intergenerational Trauma

*'Over 20 years ago, when I was at medical school, I spent some time working in a Burns Unit. For about six months after working there, I suffered flashbacks, and feelings of isolation, guilt, fear, helplessness and sadness. Last Tuesday evening, I watched a TV programme about surgery for people who had suffered severe facial burns. Watching the programme, those old feelings came back, but I was able to talk them through over the rest of the evening. I felt more peaceful for this - a deeper understanding and some resolution.*

*Two days later we set off to climb Braeriach in the Cairngorms... we scramble through the Chalamain gap, over all the giant boulders. It feels like a good day. There's a bit of a slog up to the Sron na Lairig Ridge, but we reach the top of the ridge quite easily. And suddenly, I'm back in all that fear and sorrow and loneliness. I can't stop thinking about the horror, the trauma of severe burns. And I keep thinking 'why again now?'. My chest is tight. There's a lump in my throat. I feel overwhelmed with pain and darkness and grief. And finally, as we climb the last few metres of Sron na Lairig, I start sobbing. J holds me. I can't stop. The plateau is absolutely desolate, like I feel inside. It is so painful. The sky is stormy, and filled with wind and rain. Gradually the sobbing subsides and I'm left feeling empty.*

*We press on to the top against a strong wind. Stop for about 30 seconds on the summit cairn and turn back down again. Below us in the corrie, Lochan Uaine is dark and contained. On the way down the ridge, we pass a heap of metal poles...wonder what they are. Back along the ridge, my thoughts are still pulled to the trauma. The strange thing is, I realise - it feels like I'm inseparable from all people who suffer this trauma, and at the same time, it's not mine. I go back in my mind on the way down, layers of free-association. Pushing through the thick heather. My father's war experiences, both grandfathers witnessing deaths from burns. The darkening sky. A story about me almost pulling a pan of boiling milk over myself when I was two. A wee boy I met when I was 12 - his face scarred with burns. We jump over streams - in Scotland, they're called 'burns'....Burning witches...I'm starting to think, what happened in this area? We wade through some more thick heather and bog. Exhausted. Something's gradually clearing. Moving off... opening out.*

*A couple of days later, feeling rested, and no longer possessed by all of this, I think of the pile of metal on top of the mountain, and google 'Braeriach Crash'. And there it is. During the Second World War, two bombers crashed into the Sron na Lairig ridge. The wreckage was spread over to dark little Locahn Uaine. So... that was the crack that opened up in time! It was like somehow I connected with the spirits of the men who probably burned to death on that mountain with their friends...*

*Since this experience, I feel that I have laid something to rest. Some parts of my experience after working in the Burns Unit were appropriate resonances with what I had witnessed. However, some parts were of my own unconscious making - the fear and guilt that came from making 'people with burns' into something alien; the isolation that came from being ashamed to speak of the trauma; the helplessness that came from my disconnection. Now, when I think of this trauma, and that part of myself, it is inextricably woven into the landscape of Braeriach. I feel connected to the suffering, but not overwhelmed by it. I no longer feel alone with it, and the guilt and shame are gone. I'm left hoping that I was able to give something in return to the ghosts of that place' (Kerr, 2010, 2009).*

This story illustrates the layered and interconnected nature of unconscious contents in the psyche and in the land. Personal history opened out to intergenerational residues of trauma, and right out to collective trauma - contained in the land, imprinted on that place (Roll, 1997; Sheldrake, 2006; Irwin and Watt, 2007). It seems likely that if trauma is near the surface of the personal unconscious, it can act like a resonator for physical and psychological wounds held collectively in the land. Understanding this kind of process and being receptive to its meaning offers the potential for healing personal, and perhaps even collective and ecological, trauma (for example see Bache, 2000).

## Images & Symbols

The resonance of unconscious and ecological elements can arise spontaneously, as described above, or it can be more deliberately sought. In our work with groups, we have often found that participants discover symbolic forms, which hold up a mirror to their individual and collective situations. During solo time in wilderness, features of the landscape often take on a symbolic quality. Rivers, trees, dense areas of scrub and clearings in forests, come to reflect stages in both the psychological and the physical journey simultaneously. For example, Gavin, a participant in a recent project, described this experience in one of his blogs (McLellan, 2009):

*'This tree was not well. Up above me was a resplendent rowan tree, nestled next to a waterfall showing off its clumps of berries like Christmas decorations. But here on the ledge things were sparse, spindly and sickly. Moving under it I could see how growing out of the top of the rock cleft gave it limitations; a misshapen gravity defying U-bend trunk, stunted branches, a smattering of leaves and shrivelled fruit. Like our treatment of the planet this tree was trying to sustain itself but drew too much on limited resources.*

*I imagined cutting the tree down and counting its rings. Its thickness suggested several decades, I fancied it, like me, being about 40. How had our lives compared? What seasons, weather, colours had it seen pass? How many birds had visited and taken rest in its branches? Straining towards sunlight, pushing roots in tight gaps for nourishing soil, scattering seeds?*

*Whose life was the more life affirming?'*

Through guided imagery, storytelling and contemplative work outdoors, we also invite participants to step into the space where landscape and psyche meet in symbol and metaphor. Gavin describes his experience of this in a later blog:

*'Frequently I am at the summit ridge, possibly over the horizon, away working, providing for my family in the forest brook. The glade spoke to me about home, a place of canopied security, sheltered, a source of comfort and nourishment, yet I wasn't within sight of it often enough. I need to find a way to stop ascending ridges of work pressures and pressing on to the next career summit and find the will to stay closer, within sight and calling distance of the valley, the tree line, and the homely bank.'*

## Myth & Archetype

While some experiences bring individual and collective trauma to consciousness, and others find symbolic imagery as a mirror for unconscious material, the following stories describe encounters with local mythological, and more widely known archetypal, forms.

*'I was alone camping in the Sant Aniol valley in the foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees. Being in the bottom of a deep, steep sided gorge, the only flat area to sleep on was a gravel bank in the dry river bed. It was a crystal-clear night and as I lay out under the stars I could see a thin strip of the dark sky marking out the edges of the gorge high above. Either side of this strip, the rock walls of the gorge were an intense ink-black. I fell asleep.*

*I awoke suddenly, as if I'd heard a noise, but there was complete silence, not even a breath of wind. I looked up and realised I could no longer see the sky which had now clouded over. As I tried to find the edge between the gorge walls and where I knew the sky was, I saw something in the darkness. Right there, like an image on a cinema screen, I saw a man with short black hair, deeply lined and tanned skin, dressed like a shepherd in a sheep-skin gilet. I thought I was dreaming and there was a moment of confusion and panic as I realised I was in fact wide awake, lying on my back on the gravel bank in my sleeping bag. The man was bending over and reaching down, struggling with something at his feet. I could see he was pulling at something that was pinned underwater by a huge boulder in a river pool. As I looked I realised he was pulling at a corpse. The face of the corpse became clearer and I could see a young man with long thin blonde hair; his face was emaciated and drawn, his eyes closed. The corpse looked like it had been trapped for some time. Before the man could drag it free of the water the image disappeared. I scrambled out of the confines of my sleeping bag frantically looking up at the darkness but I couldn't see anything. I found my head torch and shone it around the gorge walls to the depths of its power, but could see nothing except towering rocks, trees, shrubs and shadows. It took me several hours before I could get back to sleep and when I awoke in the morning the image was very clear in my memory.*

*The following week I was waiting for a lift in Gerona, an hours drive away from the gorge. I had some spare time and was exploring the mediaeval city walls with a friend. As we descended a stairway, I noticed a barred alcove high in one of the walls. In it was a figure carved from wood, underneath it was a brass plaque engraved in Catalan. The figure was the dark-haired man who had appeared in the gorge. I was so shocked I couldn't move or speak and it took me several minutes to gather myself. My friend asked someone if they spoke Catalan and asked them to translate the plaque. The carving is, they said, of the "god of the Sant Aniol river".'*

*It wasn't until several weeks later as I was describing the vision to a friend that I realised, with a shudder of goose bumps, that the corpse was me. I had witnessed the recovery of my own dead body from entrapment under rock and water. I had been discovered and rescued by a mythological figure. I now believe this vision was a glimpse into my condition at the time, it was an affirmation that I was going through some kind of psycho-spiritual death and rebirth, and it also felt like a warning, like the vision had come to make sure I didn't let this opportunity for renewal be missed in the profanity of everyday life.*

*I had never had a 'vision' before and, to be honest, was sceptical about them. They must be something from the imagination surely? The discovery of the wooden figure in Girona soon dealt with this cynicism. There was my vision in material form - as real as a piece of wood' (Key, 2008).*

Describing a vision he'd experienced Carl Jung wrote, '*At first I could make out nothing but then I saw that there was running water. In it a corpse floated by, a youth with blonde hair and a wound in the head*' (1963, p203). He goes on to say that his vision was, '*a drama of death and renewal*'. The comparisons with the story above, in both content and interpretation, are obvious and we were shocked to find Jung's account while researching this chapter. Logically though, in exploring the collective unconscious, it should be no surprise that similar accounts of experience and meaning arise.

Interestingly, the form experienced in this story was located in a specific geographic area. It was embedded in the stone and water of a particular place. We believe this distinguishes it from more widespread archetypes that can be found across diverse geographic and cultural space. The following journal entry of a dream, and the wilderness experience where the dream character re-emerged in the physical world, describes an encounter with one such widespread archetype:

*'I had a dream featuring a frightening character who ate the flesh of children. The character was dressed in a cloak, had a long thin white beard, carried a walking stick as tall as himself and, very distinctively, had a patch over his left eye. A skinny grey dog curled subserviently around his feet. The dream was very detailed, vivid and deeply disturbing. I awoke fearful and shocked at scenes and images that I had never knowingly experienced. Where had they come from?'*

*After the dream I searched on the internet for the character I'd seen. I came across a text on Norse mythology and there he was! Staff, eye patch, beard and dog - Odin, the "All Father" (Harrison & Svensson, 2007, p63.). Suddenly, I realised the dream was about my recent experience of fatherhood, the fear of failing as a father - of consuming my daughter in my own fears and doubts. It also brought up many realisations about my own father - perhaps where my fears about fatherhood had themselves been seeded.*

*Some months later on a night solo in an ancient woodland, I met the character from my dream again. I knew I would, and had prepared myself for him - cutting a long staff of my own from a hazel tree, barring the door of my shelter with it to protect myself, and lying in wait deep into the night. Of course, I could have made all this up! A fantasy... but whatever it was, for me, that night, Odin was right there in the darkness and when I jumped up and ran at him, my staff held out horizontally in front of me, he withered, fearful and lonely, and disappeared off into the beech trees. He was the vulnerable one, not me. It was his own fear that made him consume the flesh of children and the message was clear.' (Key, 2009)*

## What we need is here

*'What if you slept,  
and what if in your sleep you dreamed,  
and what if in your dreams you went to heaven  
and there you plucked a strange and beautiful flower,  
and what if when you awoke  
you had the flower in your hand?  
Ah, what then?'*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817)

The stories we have told in this chapter suggest that psyche and matter are immanent in each other. Whichever direction the journey goes - into the psyche or out into material nature - it leads to the same territory, but this is a territory which opens to us only if we open to it.

The parapsychology researcher William Roll points to a tendency of the skin-bound self - the 'small body' - to split mind from matter. *'Matter feels different from mind to the small body, heavy, recalcitrant, immune to command, and so we place it in another part of nature.'* It is when we connect to a wider sense of self that elements of the physical world are seen to be *'permeated with meaning and memory; they are as mental as they are material.'* (Roll, 1997; Dunne & Jahn, 2003). At the depth of this work, psyche and matter seem to infuse and illuminate each other. As Robert Romanyshyn (2007), the Jungian analyst and researcher writes:

*'The soul of the world, then, is the light of nature, a dark-light, a luminosity in the darkness of matter... At the deepest level of the unconscious, the unconscious is nature. The consequence, of course, is that as the psychologist probes deeper and deeper into the psyche, he or she descends into the soul of the world... He or she discovers that the unconscious is not just in us, but that we are in the unconscious of nature, and that at the deepest level of our psyches, we retain some dim remembrance of once, very long ago, having been a part of the world's dark-light.'* (pp38 - 39)

Our stories provide some empirical support for what Romanyshyn describes. And there is some evidence for their consensual 'reality', in that we discovered that our experiences had a correspondence in the history of the specific places we visited, or in wider mythology. However, the main thing that these stories illustrate is that taking the outcome and meaning of this kind of process seriously is more important in our lives than proving the 'reality' of phenomena per se (Daniels, 2005). In the end, to argue over the objective 'validity' of the stories themselves is to commit a category error and is, as Alan Watts (1957, p13) so eloquently puts it, *'to eat the menu instead of the dinner'*. The experiences and insights described in our stories were, and still are, important in our lives. We feel that without these journeys into what Romanyshyn calls 'the soul of the world', we could have become entangled in serious psychological, spiritual or existential problems. In essence, these were wilderness experiences that healed us. But this is not only a personal healing. It is clear to us that in transformative journeys such as these, wild nature holds us through the whole transformation, and we begin to experience nature as the core of our identity - the ground of our wisdom and personal meaning.

*'As I relax into this place, I feel at the centre of my chest, a deep tenderness - like I'm touching something right at the heart of my own Being. Like I'm held in the heart of this place, and it in me....and I would do anything to protect this place. The pine branches,*

*feathery in front of the moon. The curve of the mountain. The intense cold. All of it is in me. I am in all of it. I am so grateful' (Kerr, 2010, 2010).*

Our experiences in wilderness embed us in the heart of nature, which is our own primordial heart. From this core of tenderness and joy, emerges compassionate action, beyond moral obligation, ethical duty or rational debate. We realise that we can take action - we do not need to search for a 'magical solution' outside ourselves, outside of nature, and '*pray... for new earth or heaven*'. What we need instead is,

*'to be quiet in heart, and in eye, clear.  
What we need is here.'*

**Wendell Berry (1973)**

If we make the journey wholeheartedly, we return home with insights that are profound and, most importantly, useful. We find ourselves changed - interconnected, healed. We become conscious of, and resilient to, the divisive illusions of industrial culture. The perceived separation of self and nature dissolves and, at last, we arrive home.

===

## References

- Abram, D. (1996) *The spell of the sensuous: perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Pantheon Books, New York.
- Bache, C. (1981) On the emergence of perinatal symptoms in meditation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20 (4) 339-350
- Bache, C. (2000) *Dark night, early dawn*. SUNY Press, Albany.
- Berry, W. (1973) *The Wild Geese in The selected poems of Wendell Berry 1998*, Counterpoint, Berkeley.
- Brody, H. (2002) *Maps and Dreams*. Faber & Faber, London.
- Campbell, J. (1949) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. (3rd edition, 2008) New World Library, Novato.
- Celi, A. and Boiero, M.C. (2002) The heritage of stories: A tradition of wisdom. *American Studies International*, 40 (2) 57-73
- Coleridge, S. T. (1817) quoted in Radin, D. (1997) *The conscious universe*. Harper Collins, New York.
- Daniels, M. (2005) *Shadow, self and spirit*. Imprint Academic, Exeter.
- Davis-Berman, J. and Berman, D. S. (1994) *Wilderness Therapy: Foundations, Theory and Research*. Kendall/Hunt, Dubuque.
- Dunne, B.J. and Jahn, R.G. (2003) Information and uncertainty in remote perception research. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 17 (2) 207-241
- Fox, W. (1990). *Toward a transpersonal ecology: developing new foundations for environmentalism*. Shambhala, Boston and London.
- Grof, S. (1996) *Theoretical foundations of transpersonal psychology*. In Boorstein, S. (ed) (1996) *Transpersonal Psychotherapy*, SUNY Press, Albany.
- Harrison, D. & Svensson, K. (2007). *Vikingaliv*. Fälv & Hässler, Värnamo.
- Haluza-Delay, R., (2001) Nothing here to care about: Participant constructions of nature following a 12-day wilderness program. *Journal of Environmental Education* 32(4)
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and time*. Harper, New York.
- Husserl, E., McCormick, P, Elliston, F. (1981). *Husserl, shorter works*. University of Notre Dame Press, Brighton.
- Irwin, H.J. and Watt, C.A. (2007) *An introduction to parapsychology*. McFarland and Company Inc. North Carolina.
- Jung, C.G. (1963) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Collins and Routledge, & Kegan Paul, London.

## The Ecology of the Unconscious

- Jung, C.G. in Sabini, M. (Ed.) (2002) *The earth has a soul: The nature writings of C. G. Jung*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley.
- Kaplan, R., Talbot, J.F., (1983) Psychological benefits of a wilderness experience. In: Altman, I., and F., W. J., (Eds.), *Behavior and the natural environment*. Plenum, New York.
- Kerr, M. (2009) Personal journal entry, unpublished.
- Kerr, M. (2010) Personal journal entry, unpublished.
- Key, D. (2008) Personal journal entry, unpublished
- Key, D. Key, 2010 (2009) Personal journal entry, unpublished.
- Margetts, E.L. (1953) The concept of the unconscious in the history of medical psychology. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 27 (1) 115-138
- McLellan, G. (2009) <http://www.naturalchange.org.uk/blogs/gavin-mclellan> (Accessed 3rd February, 2010)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge & K. Paul, London.
- MIND (2007) *Ecotherapy: the green agenda for mental health*. MIND, London.
- Muir, John (1911) *My first summer in the Sierra Boston*. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York.
- Næss, A. (1973) The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. *Inquiry* 16: 95-100
- Næss, A. (1986) Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World, in Sessions, G. (Ed.) (1995) *Deep ecology for the twenty-first century*. Shambhala, London.
- Næss, A. (1989) Ecosophy and Gestalt Ontology. *The Trumpeter*, 6 (4) 134-137
- Palmer, J. A., Suggate, J., Bajd, B., Hart, P., Ho, R. K. P., Ofwono-Orecho, J. K. W., Peries, M., Robottom, I., Tsaliki, E., and Van Staden, C. (1998) An overview of significant influences and formative experiences on the development of adults' environmental awareness in nine countries. *Environmental Education Research*. 4 (4) 445-464.
- Preece, R. (2009) *The courage to feel*. Snow Lion, Ithaca
- Prendergast, J.J. (2003) *Being Together*. In J.J. Prendergast, P. Fenner and S. Krystal (eds) *The sacred mirror* Paragon House, Minnesota.
- Roll, W.G. (1997) My search for the soul. in Tart, C. (ed) *Body mind and spirit: exploring the parapsychology of spirituality*. Hampton Roads, Charlottesville.
- Roszak, T., Gomes, M. & Kanner, A. (1995) *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, healing the mind*. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco.
- Romanyshyn, R. (2007) *The wounded researcher*. Spring Journal, New Orleans.
- Siri, V. (Tr E. Arneng) (1998) Dreaming with the first shaman (Noaidi). *ReVision*, 21 (1) 34-39.
- Sheldrake, R. (2006) Morphic Fields in World Futures. *The Journal of General Evolution*, 62 (1-2) 31-41.
- Snyder, G. (1990) *The practice of the wild*. North Point Press, San Francisco.
- Suzuki, D.T. (1969) *An introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Rider, London.
- Tarnas, R. (1998) The great initiation. *Noetic Sciences Review*, 47 [http://www.noetic.org/publications/review/issue47/main.cfm?page=r47\\_Tarnas.html](http://www.noetic.org/publications/review/issue47/main.cfm?page=r47_Tarnas.html) (Accessed 10th November 2009)
- United States WILDERNESS ACT (1964) Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S. C. 1131-1136) 88th Congress, Second Session September 3rd.
- Washburn, M. (1995) *The ego and the dynamic ground*. SUNY Press, Albany
- Watts, A. 1957. *The Way of Zen*. Pantheon, New York.
- Watts, A. and Huang, A. C. (1975) *Tao: The watercourse way*. Pantheon, New York.
- Williams, B.J. (2007) Pueblo parapsychology: Psi and the longbody from the Southwest Indian perspective. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 7 (2) 134-163
- Wright, P.A. (1998) Gender issues in Ken Wilber's transpersonal theory. In D. Rothberg and S. Kelly (eds.) *Ken Wilber in dialogue: conversations with leading transpersonal thinkers*. Quest Books, Wheaton.
- WWF (2009) *Natural change - psychology and sustainability*. <http://www.naturalchange.org.uk/natural-change-report/>