

Eco-psychology & The Natural Systems Thinking Process

How a simple shift in our thinking process has the potential to unite people and heal the planet.

Since I was a child I have been interested in environmental and health concerns and always wanted to 'do something' to solve the huge issue of personal and planetary crises that I saw and heard all around me. I have long been aware of the need to combine ecology with spirituality; self-care with earth care and the healing of people with that of the planet and I continually searched for the most effective way to make a positive contribution to the huge and crucial world issues from this holistic perspective. Through my life journey I have been consistently making my own efforts to 'be the change I want to see' yet I still sometimes felt powerless, helpless and hopeless to make a difference. I observed that even though the majority of people are now aware that their current lifestyles and societal structure are causing irreparable damage to the earth and all its species the alarming facts and figures do little to deter them from continuing an existence that ignores and actively contributes to these problems. Despite the knowledge that the Earth's natural resources are being used up faster than they can be renewed; that we are living totally unsustainably and participating in our own painful demise the human population continues to cause havoc and drain the life-blood from the planet. Even more unfortunate is that we are now surrounded by potential and actual solutions but in living within a society that emphasizes economic growth over preservation of biodiversity, expansion of cities over protection of forests, competition over co-operation, people are unwilling or feel unable and powerless to create a change.

It became clearly apparent that mere information concerning the earth's and humanity's problems are not enough to motivate a change to the situation. "There just has to be a better way in engaging people in awareness and solutions" I thought and with this intention in my consciousness I was guided to the course run by Project Nature Connect (www.ecopsych.com). Their courses and specifically the concept and practice of the 'Natural Systems Thinking Process' (NSTP) offered a practical tool, which promised would connect me to nature more fully and enable me to empower others in sharing what I had learnt. I read that "NSTP works because, back yard or back country, it enables people to create thoughtful moments in natural areas that let nature itself teach them what they need to know in order to restore into consciousness the wisdom and integrity of their natural intelligence" – this sounded like the perfect answer and so with great excitement I signed up for the 5 week introductory online program.

As the course commenced I was interested to read and discuss what I have long since felt - modern society is suffering from a mental sickness that, because so many of us are afflicted with and

indoctrinated into, we believe is normal. NSTP cures us of a condition that most of us do not even realize we have – **ecozombie-ism!** The majority of problems in modern society from domestic violence to global war, from cancer to cutting down rainforests can be traced to reveal the cause as a lack of understanding of ourselves as nature-connected beings. We may have certificates, degrees and doctorates but the vast majority of people in the modern world are environmentally and ecologically illiterate. This lack of self-knowledge and awareness creates a void; a longing which is then attempted to be filled with all manner of unhealthy substitutes such as alcohol, drugs, television, and leads to abusive behavior, violence and war. Because there is no substitute for nature these behaviors continue endlessly without ever appeasing the empty feeling yet as we learn to simply be satisfied and satiated through nature's love and goodness many addictions, cravings, medical conditions and unhealthy practices are reduced or completely dissipated. The NSTP provides true holistic healing in that we heal ourselves and nature at the same time and learn to appreciate these two as one.

I assert that this is highly and vitally necessary because:

- The damage we are doing to our planet and all of nature (including ourselves) is spiritually, morally and ethically unjust and unacceptable.
- It is impossible to fully develop our potential as holistic human beings and experience complete health and wellness whilst being disconnected from nature and displaying a complete lack of responsibility to all the other species we share the world with.
- People and planet are inextricably linked and it is through looking within ourselves and throughout nature and by truly understanding and appreciating our bond and relationship that we may enjoy a sacred connection to the Divine and truly fulfil our life and soul purpose.

The coursework demands that participants to be in direct sensory contact with nature. Whilst it has long been proven that listening to natural sounds and having pictures of nature can reduce stress and speed up recovery of ill patients these replications or tokens of nature are merely palliatives - there is no substitute for the real thing! Interestingly this aspect is not at all limiting for people in urban environments as the exercises can be completed anywhere with anything from a potted plant to a house cat; a back garden or 50 acre rural estate. I had the incredible privilege of completing the course whilst in the most pristine natural environment of Dominica, yet I have since done nature connected activities in the city and even amidst cars and confusion, concrete buildings and asphalt roads nature still has a presence that can be felt and connected with. From a lone tree outside a shopping mall, to a weed pressing through the paving and a puddle reflecting the clouds in the sky we learn to be sensitive to nature's companionship wherever we are.

Project Nature Connect is one of many emerging courses in the realm of 'Eco-psychology'. This relatively 'new', yet in fact ancient discipline is at the forefront of a tremendous paradigm shift of consciousness and the ways in which we view ourselves and participate in the world. Through seemingly simple exercises we become part of a radical approach to self and societal

transformation by fully appreciating nature in the way expounded by the deep ecology movement – not just as a valuable resource but as an actual part of us. We realise that to keep destroying what nurtures us and *is us*, is tantamount to chewing off our own arm whilst trying to feed ourselves. From this perspective a desire to preserve and regenerate nature is more than just self-preservation but a demonstration of the highest self-respect as the self expands to encompass all life. As Eco-psychologist John Seed states “An eco-psychological paradigm shifts the source of environmental action from shame, blame, coercion, and sacrifice to devotion, love, joy, and invitation. Authentic service is selfless and skilful.” Eco-psychology moves us from the human centred perspective of anthropocentrism where we sit at the top of a hierarchical pyramid with all other life forms under our dominion to the eco-centric view of equally sharing the earth with all other aspects of the natural world.

The NSTP assignments and indeed the whole philosophy of Eco-psychology encourage and foster new and expansive ways of thinking which are crucial in creating change. As Einstein famously advised “we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that created them”. Through a personal and in-depth understanding of our connection with nature we can no longer be a sane citizens of an insane society and this shakes us out of our comfort zone! This is highly necessary in the years ahead for what Joanne Macy call The Great Turning - a consciousness shift that is ushering in the ecological revolution. The beauty of the nature connect process is that it nurtures and strengthens us to not only know what is right but to act in accordance and *be what is right*.

The principles of Eco-psychology are in many ways similar or identical to the wisdom of indigenous land based cultures, which show reverence and appreciation for the sacred and spiritual in all aspects of life. We learn that the word ‘psyche’ also means spirit and mind therefore Eco-psychology can just as easily be called Eco-spirituality. As one of my favorite India Arie songs “God is Real” expresses it is a connection with nature that allows us to truly appreciate a divine presence, to feel unified with infinite wisdom and the abundant source of intelligence and power. Through the experience of connecting to nature the distinction between the divine and mundane becomes obsolete and we realize that all is sacred, every thought word and action can be an act of worship and life becomes a consistent and constant act of praise. ‘Know Thyself’ is the greatest spiritual command yet we cannot know ourselves if we are disconnected from the source of all life. Conversely and more encouragingly, we can truly know ourselves through a connection with nature and the ability to trust ourselves and our own feelings are pre-requisites for being able to convey this same love and trust to others. Eco-psychology gives us the awareness and tools to integrate our spiritual beliefs with practical action as Gary Snyder explains in his book ‘Good Wild Sacred’,

“Inspiration, exaltation, insight do not end, however, when one steps outside the doors of the church. The wilderness as a temple is only a beginning. That is: one should not dwell in the specialness of the extraordinary experience, not leave the political world behind to be in a state of heightened insight. The best purpose of such studies and backpack hikes is to be able to come back into the world to see all the land about us, agricultural, suburban, urban, as part of the same giant realm of processes and beings; never totally ruined, never completely unnatural.” (Snyder 1994)

Personally the Nature Connect course and subsequent exploration into the world of Eco-psychology provides a solid foundation and a highly efficient tool through which to achieve personal and planetary change. Once we learn the NTSP it is almost impossible to act in nature-disconnected ways and we become kinder more peaceful, humane beings. As I experience fully the joys of nature and contemplate what my life would be without natural attractions I am more prepared to stand up and shift into new ways of being and living and further my commitment to live holistically. I finally feel as if I am ‘doing something’ by ‘being’ true to my nature. It was inspiring to imagine that, even if it has to happen one person at a time, world change is occurring as a result of connecting to the highest form of love – the unconditional love that nature has for us.

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