

Double Vision

The Gestalt of Our Environmental Crisis

Marianne Fry Lecture, Bristol. July 9th 2011 Mary-Jayne Rust

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When I read a little about Marianne Fry on the MFL website, I could see that what I am going to speak about today resonates a great deal with her interests. Just to pick out a couple of examples:

Germany and the holocaust: there is an ecological holocaust in our midst, and we know from history how difficult this is to face, think about and talk about. Perhaps one of the most difficult things at THIS time is that, although we are the victims of this holocaust, we are also the perpetrators.

Gestalt and spirituality: for me the ecological crisis offers opportunity for spiritual opening; but the transformation requires inviting back in what has been pushed into the margins, and only when we have the whole together can healing happen.

Joanna Macy writes: “...we perceive for the first time in our history the possibility of our death as a species. Facing our despair and anguish for our world is, in effect, a kind of initiatory rite, necessary to our growing up, required for our maturation as a species. This implies, of course, that growing up - in this case, acceding to the rights and responsibilities of planetary adulthood - involves radical uncertainty. It means accepting that we do not and cannot know whether we are here to serve as deathbed attendants for our world or as midwives to a new chapter of life on Earth.”

(Macy, J <http://www.joannamacy.net/joannasletters/145-september72005.html>)

Theologian Thomas Berry writes: “It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we are in-between stories. The Old Story - the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it - sustained us for a long time..... But now it is no longer functioning properly, and we have not yet learned the New Story” (Thomas Berry, 1978).

By way of introduction I want to say a little about the psychological dimensions of old story that we are leaving behind and new story that we are moving into.

The old story, sometimes referred to as The Myth of Progress, describes the onwards and upwards rise of human civilisation, from a primitive life in dark caves into the light of reason (Tarnas, 2007, p11-16). This began as an understandable need to protect ourselves from the elemental forces of nature.

From a psychological perspective, this has turned into, over time, the journey of a male hero who is trying to conquer nature, for whom nature has come to embody a number of things, including: nature as the all-powerful elemental enemy; nature as sensual temptress; nature as

wild and out of control; nature as unconscious dark matter. In this story humans are said to be the only conscious beings on the planet.

The hero's solution is to tame, control and dominate the aspects of nature which are threatening, including his own human nature. He also tries to escape the struggles of being an embodied part of the ecosystem through transcendence, reaching upwards in search of a God in the sky. He does this by cutting himself *out* of the web, an image which appears in popular stories today. This is a very powerful story about how and where we find peace and freedom.

This withdrawal from nature leaves us in a place of feeling not so much disconnected, but once removed from the earth, as if living on top of the land rather than inside a living system.

The new story is about coming back into relationship with the earth, returning to the joys and difficulties of embodiment and intimacy with the rest of nature. To live sustainably we must find a way of accepting the power and limits of the earth, respecting the needs of others with whom we share our home. How might this transformation take place?

Today I will tell some stories which describe different aspects of this.

From Human-centrism to Eco-centrism

I begin with a story which I first heard from Stephan Harding at Schumacher College. It describes a pivotal moment in the life of Aldo Leopold who was a wild life manager in the early 1900s and one of the fathers of the modern ecology movement. As a man of his time, he was of the view that humans were superior to the rest of nature, and that it was morally right to manage and control nature to ensure human safety and well-being.

One day, Leopold and friends were out hunting when they spotted some wolves close to the river. They shot excitedly into the pack and Leopold rushed down to see a wolf as she was dying. He writes: “We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes - something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thoughtthat no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.”

(Leopold, 1948, p 129)



He then describes how he watched the gradual eradication of wolves and the multiplying of deer until “every edible bush and seedling (was) browsed, first to anaemic desuetude, and then to death”. In the end the deer herd starved, “dead of its own too-much”. (Ibid)

After this experience Leopold developed a land ethic which “changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.” (Ibid p 243-4)

Stephan Harding comments: “The attitude that saw nature as a dead machine, as there solely for human use, vanished. (Leopold) had recognised the existence of an active agency far greater than himself in the great wild world around him” (Harding, 2006 p 43).

This describes the transformation from a human-centric to an eco-centric perspective.

I feel very moved when I listen to how Leopold became open to the presence of the wolf as she lies dying. This is such a tender moment - an intimate meeting between the fierce green fire of souls. The wolf is no longer a threatening *object* for Leopold to erase. She is now a subject. Ironically it is her death which triggers a 'sense' that his actions are not right, and this implies that he's now embodied - connected in a feeling way to world around him. Now he *listens* to the *views* of wolf and mountain. How this startles the western mindset. How poignant that it takes her death for him to awaken.

The story is also a metaphor for the present moment. Leopold stands for humans as hunter, intent on dominating, controlling and taming wild nature for our own ends. Having virtually wiped out our predators, we are also like the deer - multiplying, consuming and denuding the earth of her bounty. Will we, too, die of food shortages? As climate change quickens, the ecological crisis faces us with the potential of our own species death, along with so many other species in this sixth mass extinction. We are both perpetrator and victim.

What if, like Leopold, we dare to stare into the eyes of nature, to be present to what and who is dying? Can we awaken to the fierce green fire of wild nature, to know that the world is inhabited by aware, living subjects, each with their own view? Can we also awaken to that fierce green fire inside, our own wild nature, often buried beneath centuries of human domestication? This is the Great Joy of Joys.

At that very moment of being present comes a tsunami of grief for what is dying and what has been lost, for the tragic abuse of the other-than-human world, for the loss of connection

with our own nature, the resulting self and body hatred, and a fear that it is now too late to reverse climate change. What have we done to our *home*? What will become of our children's future? This is the Great Grief.

Many writers, especially in the field of ecopsychology describe this process as reconnecting with nature (eg see Roszak et al 1995). However, this can give the rather simplistic impression of going *back* to nature, returning to a state of blissful harmony, a nostalgia for Eden often projected onto indigenous peoples. It also reinforces that old paradigm dualism that we are not part of nature. Perhaps a more accurate description of what is needed is to return, in the present, to an *intimate relationship* with nature. What we know from human relationships is that intimacy – sustaining a close relationship with the other – is beautiful, complex and difficult. It involves all the fears, hurts, losses, grief and trauma that may accompany love in any reciprocal relationship. Embodiment, and recovering an intimacy with the other than human world, is therefore a mix of joy and pain. Crucially, it is about finding a way of being with our vulnerability as creatures.

The Process of Change

Leopold's story describes a significant moment of change that was instant and spontaneous. These kinds of transformative experiences are not uncommon among people who spend time in the wilds (Key, 2003; Key & Kerr, 2011). Indigenous cultures have always recognised that spending time alone in wilderness can return humans to original nature. However, their ritual practices, which have been developed over thousands of years, recognise the need to prepare for, digest, and integrate such powerful experiences into the wisdom of the community. This is a reminder that we have lost many of the rituals and vital safe containers for collective change, as well as a knowledge about the process of change itself.

The shift to an ecocentric view can be triggered in many other ways. People who have spent time in other, non-western cultures may come into contact with sophisticated cosmologies and lifestyles which embody a more earth centred way of living. Artists, philosophers or anyone who inhabits the borderland (Bernstein, 2006, 2011), may be more in touch with what has been pushed out of mainstream view, or experiences which do not fit into modernity. Those who have the courage to speak out are often the people who are initially seen as fools, but who may become the visionaries of our time, acting as a conduit for new ways of seeing.

Crisis can also trigger change in ways of seeing. While this may begin with a startling new insight, the ripples of this may take years to become integrated into the minutiae of everyday lives. In psychological language, this involves facing the shadow (aspects of self and other that are difficult to own), untangling projections and inviting back what has been pushed into the margins, as well as grieving for what has been lost and making amends. This is a painful process for the ego to endure, but the rewards are many.

Ecological Loss and Grief

For several decades Buddhist scholar and eco-philosopher Joanna Macy has pioneered ‘the work that reconnects’, offering carefully facilitated workshops for people to express and explore their feelings in relation to global crisis. This reconnects us to ourselves and to each other, and empowers us in working for change (Macy, 1998).

In 1992 she offered a series of workshops to people living in areas contaminated by the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl, Ukraine. They describe themselves as ‘people of the forest’ and yet because of contamination, the only contact they had with trees was the forest wallpaper inside their homes. The effects of the disaster included a range of physical

illnesses, as well as explosive anger and grief. Yet the group was reluctant to talk about this; they'd had enough pain and wanted to get on. "Why have you done this to us?" one woman cried out. "I would be willing to feel the sorrow, all the sorrow in the world, if it could save my daughters from cancer. Can my tears protect them? What good are my tears if they can't?"

Joanna responded with "I have no wisdom to meet your grief. But I can share this with you: after the war which almost destroyed their country, the German people determined that they would do anything to spare their children the suffering they had known. They worked hard to give them a rich and safe life. They created an economic miracle. They gave their children everything - except for one thing. They did not give them their broken hearts and the children never forgave them for that."

The following morning everyone returned to the workshop. The first to speak was the above-mentioned woman who said: "It feels like my heart is breaking open. Maybe it will keep breaking again and again every day, I don't know. But somehow, I can't explain, it feels right. This breaking connects me to everything and everyone, as if we were all branches of the same tree." One by one they said that it had been very hard, but now they were beginning to feel cleansed and uncontaminated, for the first time. (For a full account of this story see <http://www.joannamacy.net/theelmdance.html>)

It is an understandable wish to protect ourselves, each other and our children from the pain of the world. But the desire to 'get on' and 'be positive' in the face of overwhelming grief and anger, keeping a stiff upper lip, is part of the old 'onwards and upwards' story. It is a drive not only to conquer the land, but to conquer the inner world as well. Vulnerability is so hard to stay with; but when grief (or any strong emotion) is blocked then a series of problems may

follow such as feelings of disconnection, eating problems or other addictions, or physical illness.

Part of the new story is a more therapeutic approach, learning to go with the flow of emotions, to learn how to ride the waves of grief which come and go. This is a move away from linear progress for it completes the circle by including backwards and downwards, honouring the need to go *back* over things and *down* into the body and the unconscious. Wise action depends on this act of reflection.



Grief is a powerful connecting force and the blocking of it can leave people feeling isolated. There is often unacknowledged grief in our relationship with the rest of nature which inevitably includes the pain of losing loved ones, or trauma when places or creatures are damaged. Often our first experience of death and grief in childhood is losing a pet. A favourite tree which has become a familiar companion in play or solace may be chopped down with no warning, nor any recognition of the feelings of loss involved. Moving home involves loss in relation to place. There is also the trauma of revisiting a special place only to discover it has been desecrated by development or pollution. The larger traumas such as earthquakes, floods, famine, and the many different kinds of ecocide may take generations to recover from. In all of these ways and more, our bonds with the whole earth community run deep, and call for recognition.



A memorial to lost species - possibly the first - is in the making, in Portland, Dorset, UK (www.memoproject.org). This will be a stone monument bearing the images of all the species of plants and animals known to have gone extinct in modern times. A bell will be tolled when a species becomes extinct. Marking the loss of what is happening in our world is an important step towards making amends and rebuilding ecological community. This is an expression of love. There is also a Life Cairn on top of Mount Caburn near Lewes, E. Sussex; this cairn commemorates all the species who have become extinct as a result of human activity. (<http://www.facebook.com/Thelifecairn>)

Unlearning Consumerism

Cutting down on carbon emissions also brings loss, but a loss that is complex. Most people are now aware we must give up having so much stuff. We are caught in a giant eating problem. But facing our ravenous consumption of the earth can arouse strong feelings of guilt for what has been branded as greed - a quality that humans would prefer to project onto animals, especially pigs.

The danger is that trying to live sustainably becomes a new form of diet: The Carbon Diet. Diets use old paradigm methods of using the mind to discipline the body. Bodily appetites are

not to be trusted and must be kept under strict control for fear, perhaps, of insatiable hunger; body hatred is one of the by-products. This is a top down approach which is all about being 'good'. The inevitable then follows: breaking the rules to binge on 'naughty' food, a sensual orgy not unlike the sexual excitement of having an affair. The carbon diet urges people to live the good green life, while rampant consumerism and life in the fast lane can easily become part of the naughty, exciting, sensual orgy of modernity.

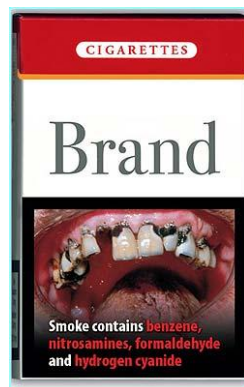
A therapeutic approach gets beyond these 'good' and 'bad' labels to explore the longings and fears that propel us into consuming too much. Feelings of lack are hard to admit to in a culture obese with privilege. The irony is that the more access we have to this quick fix illusion of happiness, the harder it becomes to live through the frustrations to find experiences which satisfy in the long term.

This is further complicated in a culture where our status symbols, rites of passage and indicators of success are tied up with material wealth. For example, learning to drive and acquiring a car has become one of the rites of passage into adulthood; it is a symbol of power in our society. Exchanging a car for a bike can feel like going backwards in life, losing power and status.

What does it mean to leave space unfilled, to leave parts of the garden un-managed, to have only what is needed?

When stuff becomes a symbol for status or safety, feelings emerge in the process of downshifting. It may trigger fears of not having enough, of losing status, of feeling powerless or of not being seen. At a deeper level it may stir primal fears of hunger and deprivation. So

hanging onto stuff is a way of warding off those fears, keeping the dividing line very firm between the fantasy of some dark and primitive past, and our apparently civilised present.



Perhaps we need clever advertising to make Climate Change as anti-social as smoking?

Recovery involves asking, what is it we are really hungry for? Spending time in the garden, listening to the birds in the local park, lying on the beach and feeling the rhythm of the waves - these are all experiences which nourish our sensual selves in a more satisfying way than consumer goods. Such experiences open portals into the timelessness of simply being - as opposed to the frantic doing, compartmentalised into hours, so prized by cultural norms.

Over the past few years I have co-facilitated one-week courses in Scotland which offer time in wild nature to deepen an exploration of sustainable living. At the heart of the week is a one-day solo experience, where participants leave at dawn to find a spot to stay in for the rest of the day in silence, returning at dusk. There is nothing to do. This is about simply being, listening, watching outside and watching inside, all day.



This is not all bliss, of course! There are fears of bad weather, being cold, or getting lost - not just in the mountains, but in the openness of time. Yet the immensity of the day allows for ample contemplation in which anxieties and frustrations have the space to surface, to be met, and lived through. It never ceases to amaze me how profoundly nourishing this simple experience can be. How hungry people are for the adventure of meeting nature in the raw, yet how seldom do we allow ourselves uninterrupted solitude in the presence of the wild. The ego fears what the soul yearns for: to stare into the eyes of the wolf, to meet and be humbled by the mysterious and powerful universe we inhabit, to feel the excitement of meeting Eros in raw, wild nature, to surrender to boundlessness, to recover original nature. (For stories of solo experiences see Key & Kerr 2011)

Untangling projections

It is through these meetings that we begin to untangle projections and find what belongs to whom. In one of the most well-known David Attenborough documentaries, he inches his way into a gorilla family, demonstrating their gentle, placid nature. He ad libs on camera:



“The male is an enormously powerful creature but he only uses his strength when he is protecting his family and it is very rare that there is violence within the group. So it seems really very unfair that man should have chosen the gorilla to symbolise everything that is aggressive and violent, when that is the one thing that the gorilla is not — and that we are.” (Attenborough, D. 1979)

Few humans are ever killed from attacks by wild animals. However, millions of animals are killed by humans each year (eg for food, sport, clothes, and medical research) and thousands of humans are murdered by other humans. So it would seem that the most dangerous wild animal on earth is the human being! Yet many wild animals are still killed for sport in order to protect humans. This is, in part, in order to maintain a myth in which hunters can remain heroes and animals can continue to carry our projections of wildness and uncontained aggression. (Russell 2006)

This does not make wild animals or wilderness safe. The problem is about attitudes to risk and danger. The hero in the Myth of Progress tries to make his world safe by making increasingly elaborate defence systems, (as demonstrated by today's health and safety measures) or worse still, killing off 'the other'. Yet understanding the rest of nature, being able to read the language of the other, knowing wild as our own condition, is a far more skilful route to safety.

Canadian naturalist Charlie Russell, known as "the bear man of Kamchatka", has been co-existing peacefully with grizzly bears in Russia for 40 years. He started out as a rancher and



discovered that getting to know the habits of the local bears was an effective way of protecting his cattle. Russell writes, "For eons the only acceptable way to think about bears

has been in terms of them being totally unpredictable and ferocious” and “I understood that disharmony between bears and humans was not the bears fault. It was a human inadequacy brought about by our fear and distrust of them”. (Russell, 2006)

Biologist Dr. Lynn Rogers has been studying black bears in Minnesota for several decades. He runs courses to educate people in a place where bears are regularly shot for sport. ‘Bearwalker of the Northwoods’ is a moving documentary about his work which shows what is possible when humans are willing to have the patience to understand bear language.

For example, a clip shows Rogers standing outside a bears den with cubs. The bear is snarling at them and banging her paw ferociously against the side of the den. Rogers remains calm, and says “She’s not a mean bear, she’s just a nervous bear..... Juliette trusts me – she’s just worried about the extra camera. She’ll do that ritualised display and then settle down”. Rogers then feeds her from the palm of his hand; in the space of 30 seconds she is calm and friendly, and he is able to stroke her. (Rogers, L. 2010)

Wild nature is often feared as being aggressive, dangerous and out of control. Stories of werewolves, Count Dracula and other human-animal characters embody the worst fears of our own animal nature (wild/human explored in Totton 2010 pp138-157). At the other end of



the spectrum are fears of apathy, becoming a couch potato, or stuck in a comatose vegetative state; or sprawling out with no boundaries, in an amoeba-like state. Human nature includes this entire spectrum of animal, vegetable and mineral. Yet the story of evolution – our current Creation Myth – would have us believe that we left all those qualities behind in others ‘lower down’ the evolutionary scale, while we at the top have the gift of consciousness, analytic thinking, and the capacity to resist instinct. But increasingly scientific research is erasing the thick line between humans and animals, and as a result our identity as humans is unclear.

We project onto aspects of the world all the time; this is a helpful way of learning about self and other. The problem comes when what has been projected out cannot be re-owned. It is clear from the history of apartheid, women’s rights and slavery that untangling cultural projections is very complex. For those in positions of ‘power over’ this involves unbearable guilt for the damage inflicted, as well as humiliation. This psychological work takes generations, and it sheds some light on the difficulties involved in recovering ecological intimacy, for humans are in a position of ‘power over’ the nonhuman world. The implications of this are radical, including recognising the rights of nature in law. (Ecuador is the first country to recognize Rights of Nature in its Constitution <http://therightsofnature.org>) . This is a radical re-thinking of so many of our habits, such as experiments on animals, factory farming, zoos, and the thousands of ways in which we make use of the nonhuman world. What is often missed in this process of recovery is that the process of projection means losing vital parts of ourselves.

When the white man projects his wild animal instinctual self onto black people, all the colour is taken out of the white man; he is left like a monochrome print, cut off from his colour and creativity, inhabiting monoculture.

When a man projects his vulnerability and intuition onto women he is left in a cut-off, disconnected world of his analytic mind, unable to relate.

When a woman projects out her wild animal self, she becomes afraid of the fur on her face, the hair on her body, her flesh, her instincts, her body.

When we idealise wilderness, we go off in search of our own divinity, beauty, and wild mind, flying to unspoilt places in hordes, in search of peace and tranquillity, inevitably spoiling the places we visit.

Old and New Stories

The new story is not made by erasing the old story but emerges out of its retelling. The young male hero who battles against nature is, like all of us, a vulnerable creature who is trying his best to defend himself against the terrors of nature. He deals with his through trying to rise above everyone and everything and ends up losing touch with his earthy nature, his bodily instincts and intuition, lost in a cloud of philosophical abstraction. His ego needs the teachings of intimate immensity so that he can reweave himself back into the web and recover his animal, vegetable and mineral natures. This is a move from being a solar hero to a lunar hero, one who is able to die and be reborn, who knows of 'power with' rather than 'power over', and who knows that all progress returns to 0. This new story is in fact an ancient story, known by indigenous cultures. It will take time for us to work out how this manifests in our modern world.

Can we make the leap to become Homo Sapiens, or will we die out as Homo Industrialis Destructivensis?

Here is a final story of transformation from astronaut Edgar Mitchell who is on his way home from space in Apollo 14 in 1971, contemplating his carbon origins. He calls this experience the 'Big Picture Effect':

“We were rotating, and every 2 minutes a picture of the earth, the moon and the sun, and a 360deg panorama of the heavens, appeared in the window as I looked. From my training in astronomy.... I realised that matter in our universe was created in star systems and thus the molecules in my body, in the spacecraft, in my partners body, were manufactured in some ancient generation of stars.....we are all part of the same stuff and in modern physics you'd call this interconnectedness. It triggered this experience of saying, “Wow, those are my stars, my body is connected to those stars” and this was accompanied by a deep ecstatic experience which continued all the way home.



This was a whole body experience. When I got home I wanted to find out what this meant. I asked scientists, but they couldn't help me, so I appealed to anthropologists who pointed out to me that in the sanskrit is what's called Samadhi which was an experience of seeing things as a unity accompanied by ecstasy. I realised that in virtually in every culture in the world there is a similar experience - you see things in a larger context than before. I do believe that

is beginning of all religions, when some mystic had that kind of experience and tried to make sense of it and put a story around it..... Thereafter I became a 'peacenik'." (This is an edited extract; for the full story see

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KE-PUTVULFg&feature=related>)

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