

Home
Current Issue
Archives
Search
Editorial Contact
Advertising
Family Shopping



Columnists

Ecopsychology

Therapeutic Healing In The Wilderness Serene

by Alisa Ruby, M.A.

Spring fever! What is that unexplainable energy that rushes through us and makes us feel giddy like a teenager in love? There is now quantifiable research connecting our emotional state with our natural environment. This field of research, known as Ecopsychology, is gaining international popularity in the psychological community, bridging the gap between ecology and psychology in relation to our global ecological crisis. Traditional environmentalists tend to look at the problem in terms of science, while most psychologists do not even consider the environment. Ecopsychology sees the environmental crisis as a psychological crisis where humans of western civilization have separated their identities from the rest of the natural world. We are greater than our perceived identities, and are much more impacted by our environment than we usually consider. According to the Ecopsychology Institute, eco-psychology is “the skillful application of ecological insight to the practice of psychotherapy, the study of our emotional bond with the Earth, and re-defining "sanity" as if the whole world mattered.” At a recent conference in northern California, eco-psychologists spoke about the biophilia

hypothesis, or the human love of living things, which focused on research stating that somatic complaints develop among humans who do not incorporate nature into their lives. They believe that 75% of Americans seek the outdoors when under distress. Why is this? According to the International Community for Eco-psychology, or ICE, "At its core, ecopsychology suggests that there is a synergistic relationship between planetary and personal well being; that the needs of the one are relevant to the other."

My observations of our relatively dysfunctional society make it difficult for me to believe otherwise. So many of us in this urban metropolis are stressed out, overweight, anxious, depressed, spiritually hungry and suffering from all sorts of disorders, yet we continue at the same crazy pace, day in and day out. We seek quick fixes in the form of antidepressants, candy bars or plastic surgery, and so often we suppress our painful emotions with smoking, alcohol and/or drugs. But, we continue suffering in isolation, trying to live up to the expectations of others and the unattainable goals we have set for ourselves. We are so caught up in our own personal, limiting dramas that we forget we are a part of a larger community. How much is our environmental crisis the consequence of our human suffering? Humans are still a fraction of the global system and completely dependent on the planet's healthy resources in order to function properly. As our planet becomes ill, we, too, develop illness and imbalance. The ecological crisis is described through a series of facts and figures – statistics on declining species and other natural resources, temperature and sea level fluctuations, and increased percentages of toxicity in food, soil, water, and our bodies. It is all so discomfoting. The ecological crisis includes physical resources, but it reflects all of our resources – our psyches or souls, our ability to feel and deeply engage, our capacity to see beauty and to love.

When we see the future as a place of doom and gloom, it is easy to disengage from life and see our efforts as useless. Getting caught up in this scarcity consciousness will only cause burnout and anger. Yet, the ecological crisis is real and looming, and we cannot overlook its seriousness nor minimize the importance of taking action. There are amazing developments occurring, with a variety of sustainable technologies, environmental regulations, and personal commitments to less destructive ways of living, as well as amazing people speaking out or, like Julia Butterfly Hill, living the principles of activism. However, fighting alone will not foster environmental healing. We must shift our paradigms. Spending time in nature and developing a reverence for its beauty and restorative properties is the first step. As we experience a personal connection with nature, we develop a vested interest in maintaining the harmonious systems around us. In southern California, we are fortunate to be surrounded by some of the most stunning natural landscapes on the planet. Yet how often do we put off a picnic, a bike ride or a walk on the beach to put in another hour at the office or play on the x-box? According to eco-psychologists, spending time in beautiful natural settings is not only a privilege; it's imperative for our mental health. Wilderness areas facilitate therapeutic healing because they are void of so many of the modern factors that require an outward focus. In wilderness, the lack of outward pressures and the forced increase in self-dependency and isolation provide the setting for inward self-reflection. Since the evidence of human activity in wilderness is minimal, the visitor can better observe the natural processes that have shaped an area. When one begins to comprehend the time-scale within which the processes that we now witness occur, one realizes humility. Is this not a spiritual

experience? A re-shifting of our priorities occurs and we often are able to put our daily stresses into a new perspective.

This spring, take advantage of the natural beauty surrounding Los Angeles and rebalance your mind, body, and spirit. Check out: latrails.com for directions and descriptions of hundreds of hiking trails around the Los Angeles area. Enjoy the great outdoors while we still can. You are worth it!

Alisa Ruby is a private practice Marriage and Family Therapist intern in Westwood. She can be contacted at 310-208-7187 ext. 640 for any inquiries or appointments.

©2005 Los Angeles Family Magazine