

Sharing stories of deep connection

It struck me while writing a paper on ecocentrism for issue one of *The Ecological Citizen* that we tend – as academics – to overanalyse nature and our bond with her. After all, academics *love* to talk! So I suggested this supplement of essays on “how I came to ecocentrism” to try to bring forth the deep stories and feelings involved. Originally it was going to be six essays, but it grew through peer-group discussion, and so now we have eleven fascinating essays. There is a mystery involved in talking about this (which Helen Kopnina and others touch on in their essays): given that all children have a sense of wonder at nature, why are only *some* adults ecocentric? After all, the natural world around us is incredibly beautiful and full of wonder, so why do many adults seem blind to this? The short answer is education and culture, and the anthropocentric worldview and ethics of that culture. I would add also that going through puberty and finding a mate and a job can easily bury our bond with nature. Like Reed Noss, I was lucky to ‘never grow up’, to stay a ‘big kid’ and keep alive my wonder at life. These essays give glimpses of insight on this debate. Non-human animals were key teachers about ecocentrism for several of us – the lyrebird for me, the moose and the toad for John Vucetich, the horse Freja for Reingard Spannring, the dog Belisarius for Eileen Crist, and many animals for Marc Bekoff and John (Jack) Piccolo. Plants, or rather flowers in particular, were key teachers for Ian Whyte. ‘Place’ itself is also a key teacher. For me it was the Colo Gorge and later my land on Nullo Mountain; for Helen Kopnina it was the wilds of Russia as a child; for Eileen Crist it was the wilds near her home and later in Greece.

There is also the aspect of the positive influence of a *mentor*. Jack Piccolo speaks

of the positive impact that Bob Behnke and Holmes Rolston had on his ecocentrism. Ian Whyte reflects on the positive impact of meeting both David Orton and Ted Mosquin. Joe Gray remembers the positive impact of meeting Patrick Curry. For me it was meeting my ‘spiritual sister’ Heidi while doing ecology at university. Being able to *talk about nature*, about our wonder at her, about our responsibilities to her, is important. Similarly, having people look at you as if you were mad can be a real turn-off from expressing wonder or ecocentrism or the sacredness of place. I have friends who I soon found steered right away from such discussions. It seemed especially that they could not discuss eco-spirituality. I can understand how damaging to one’s bond with nature it would be if everyone did this. Those of us with mentors were thus lucky we had them. Of course the greatest mentor is nature herself. Empathy, and the ability to listen to place, is such a key part of becoming ecocentric – it comes out in all these stories.

Several authors here feel they were born ecocentric, although Reed Noss argues that some people are genetically more prone to biophilia (loving life) than others. Eileen Crist argues: “Like every human being is, I was born in love with the Earth.” Joe Gray tells an interesting story in which an ecocentric child became an adult who did not see more-than-human nature as involving ethics, and then changed to biocentrism and then ecocentrism, largely from what he calls a “rational leap”. Now, like Eileen, I have always argued that every child feels wonder at life and that they are innately ecocentric. For example, I once told primary school kids in the Australian bush about the extinction crisis, and (playing devil’s advocate) asked them if it mattered.

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They responded: “It is just wrong!” And of course they were correct: they understood the ethics of what society is doing very well. How brainwashed then has society become as adults to forget the wisdom of childhood? However, I feel the moral of Joe’s story is that there is a way back to a buried ecocentrism.

I have spent a lot of time taking people into the Australian wilds, and I have spent a lot of time thinking about *how best* to rejuvenate people’s sense of wonder and to change society’s anthropocentric worldview, which in all senses is a dead end. My conclusion is that we will not turn things around without rediscovering that sense of wonder. That means going out

into nature with our friends and family, slowing our busy minds, and relearning to listen to the land. As Richard Louv notes in *Last Child in the Woods*, Western society has never been as divorced from wild nature as it is today. All of us can be part of changing that, of speaking out for nature’s rights, of speaking of our responsibilities to the rest of life, and of celebrating life and place. It has been a privilege to read these essays, where these authors stepped out from behind their ‘academic persona’ and spoke from the heart. It is in sharing stories of deep connection like this that we foster the wonder and caring that create change for the better. ■

Sunrise in Białowieża
Forest, Poland

Melanie Andrej

