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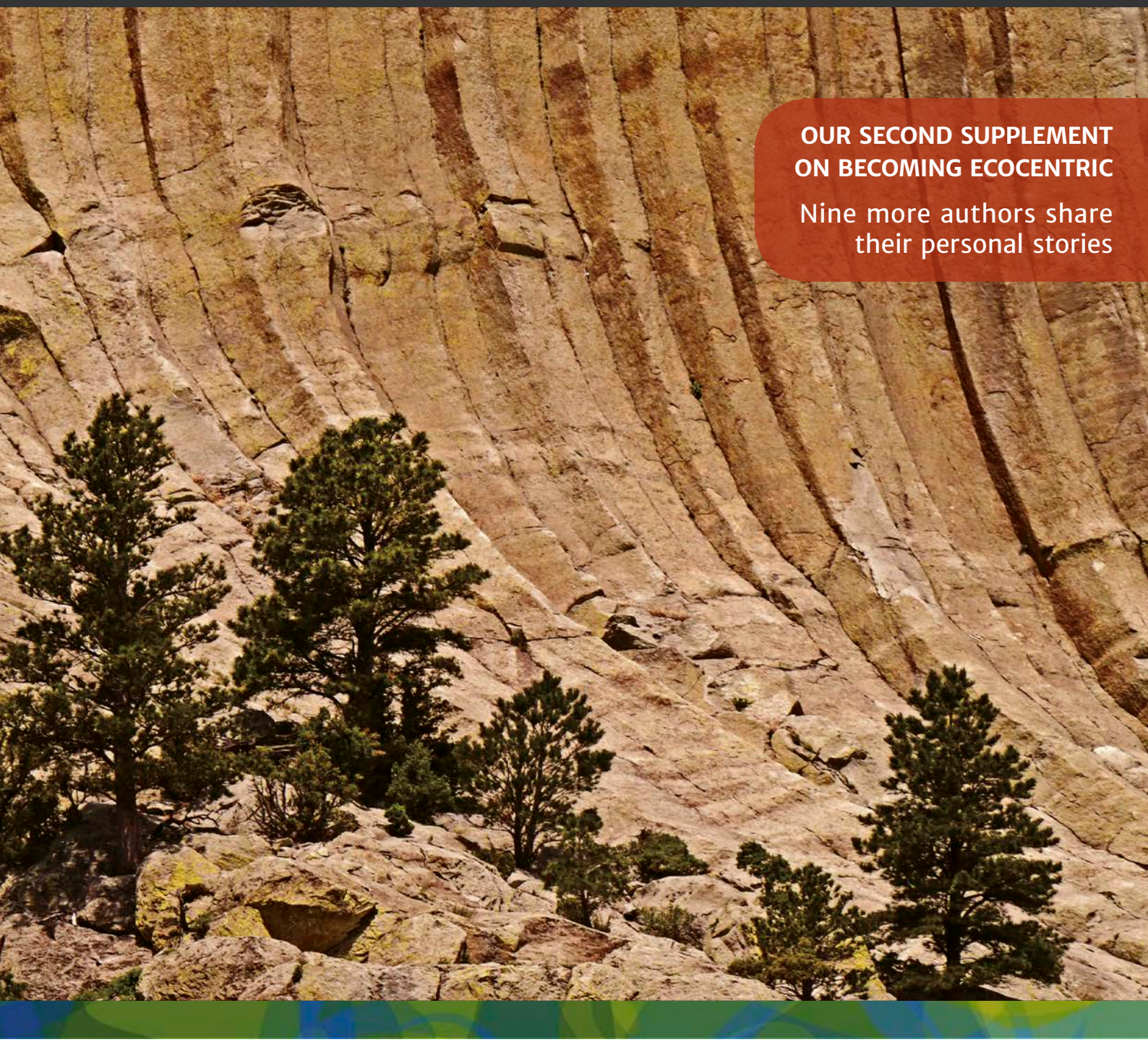

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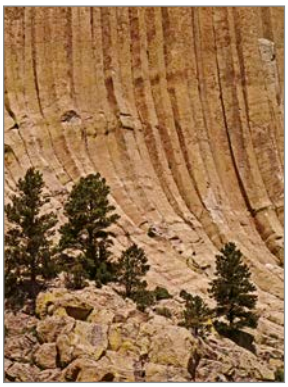

Cover photo

A section of Devils Tower, Devils Tower National Monument, WY, USA

Joe Gray

The Ecological Citizen

An ecocentric, peer-reviewed, free-to-access journal

ISSN 2515-1967

Aims

1 Advancing ecological knowledge
2 Championing Earth-centred action
3 Inspiring ecocentric citizenship
4 Promoting ecocentrism in political debates
5 Nurturing an ecocentric lexicon

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A note on terminology

Because of the extent to which some non-ecocentric terms are embedded in the English language, it is sometimes necessary for a sentence to deviate from a perfectly ecocentric grounding. The 'natural world' and 'environment', for instance, both split humans from the rest of nature but in some cases are very difficult to avoid without creating overly complex phrases. For usage notes relating to terms such as these, when they appear in the Journal, along with other language considerations, please visit: www.ecologicalcitizen.net/lexicon.html.

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> "Although we are wholes in relation to our inner organs, we are parts in relation to the outer world—parts dependent on the whole Earth for our existence."
>
> **Stan Rowe**

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Redwood trees in Humboldt Redwoods State Park, CA, USA
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More stories of deep connection

Patrick Curry

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Citation

Curry P (2019) More stories of deep connection. *The Ecological Citizen* **2**(Suppl A): 5.

Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

This supplement comprises nine autobiographical accounts of how their authors came to discover and incorporate ecocentric values into their lives. It follows the first such supplement, in 2017, edited by Haydn Washington. To some extent, Haydn has already said what needs saying in his own excellent introduction, but I will add a few things.

A common thread running through these accounts is, of course, personal encounters with the natural world, perhaps especially youthful ones. I would stress the 'personal'. While its importance in generating an awareness of nature's autonomy, integrity and beauty cannot be doubted – quite independent of our human needs, desires and abilities – many of us have been habituated to edit it out in our writing, particularly, but not only, in scientific reports. This can be misleading, because the personal dimension is also vital in continuing to sustain an ongoing engagement with nature. So putting it to the fore, as these essays do, is a matter of honesty and openness, not egotism.

Beyond that, there is a remarkable diversity of experiences evident here. Clearly there are many paths to ecocentrism – perhaps as many as there are people. Natural scientific knowledge remains a recurrent theme, especially (as Haydn rightly emphasizes) when it is driven by, and runs parallel with, a sense of wonder. If you're doing it right, so to speak, science doesn't exhaust and eliminate wonder but amplifies it, revealing new dimensions of intricacy, fragility and sheer unlikeliness. It should also generate not arrogance but humility, exposing new depths of how much we *don't* know.

In this supplement, however, there are also other routes. For Bron Taylor, Sandy Irvine, Liz Hosken, Polly Higgins and Frank de Jong, activism was and remains important. But uniquely among these authors, Bron writes as a respected social scientist. Sandy's activism has led to a life of green political engagement, which overlaps with Frank's involvement with green politics and economics, whereas for Polly it has taken the form of a fierce pursuit of legal ecojustice. Liz Hosken, meanwhile, works in the creative interstices of politics, indigenous spirituality and nature.

Philosophy, especially metaphysics – in co-development with direct personal experiences of the natural (and unnatural) world – has also been significant for several contributors. Victor Postnikov found liberation in ecologically oriented philosophers and educators. Freya Mathews found her ecocentric values powerfully articulated by Spinoza, as Sandra Lubarsky did by Whitehead and other process philosophers. Philosophy here is often accompanied – emphatically, in the case of Victor and Sandra – by a concern with aesthetic beauty, not least as an index of ecological health. Finally, Victor's related love of poetry overlaps with my own path through literature and the humanities, as well as metaphysics.

Hegel famously observed that some knowledge is only available after the fact. ("The owl of Minerva" – the avian symbol of wisdom – "spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk.") That particularly applies, I think, to discerning patterns of personal development. I'm sure these authors found it as interesting as I did, trying to trace my own path in hindsight. More to the point, however, we hope *you* will find it enjoyable and instructive to read how we got here. And if you're worried about your own way being unsure or convoluted or lengthy, then obviously you can relax. ■

Shortly after this special supplement appeared, it became known that Polly Higgins had been diagnosed with advanced cancer. We wish her strength, courage and, we hope, the solace of a shining ecocentric legacy already in place.

An ecocentric journey

Bron Taylor

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Bron is Professor of Religion, Nature and Environmental Ethics at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA, and a Fellow of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Munich, Germany.

Citation

Taylor B (2019) An ecocentric journey. *The Ecological Citizen* **2**(Suppl A): 6–10.

Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

One of the central questions animating my decades-long research has been: *What precipitates dramatic mobilization toward environmental and social justice?* In this effort I have become especially interested in the roots of biocentric and ecocentric values and have interviewed hundreds of thinkers and activists, and read many of their works. I learned that for some, there is a decisive moment in their ecocentric journey. For others, the process has been more gradual, with a number of forks along the path as they wound their way toward such a perspective. I am more accustomed (and comfortable) exploring experiences of others than I am relating my own. Yet I have had experiences that resemble those of others with whom I have spoken. So, despite some personal reticence, at the request of *The Ecological Citizen* – and thinking that perhaps some readers will find it helpful – I'll do my best to reflect on my own.

I am one of the many who cannot identify a specific decisive event in my ecocentric journey. There are many things in my past that I think may have played a role, but what that influence might have been is difficult to assess. I wonder, for example, what role my father's experience as a combat soldier, and liberator of the Dachau concentration camp, might have played. He died before I could have an adult conversation with him, but I surmise that his post-war vocation as a geologist, his desire to spend time in wild areas, and his membership of the Sierra Club were in part because, like so many soldiers, he had lost some innocence, and perhaps even some connection – some trust – in his own species. One consequence of this may have been that, when we were young, my brothers and I were regularly taken camping in the mountains and deserts of the western US. I cannot say that this conveyed great meaning to me, but it was adventurous fun and I wonder whether the privilege of being in relatively intact biological systems imprinted itself, somehow, on my young mind and heart.

Unfortunately, my father and mother, well before the time I entered my teenage years, had a deeply troubled relationship. Although I will never know all the reasons for this, what was obvious is that my mother became deeply distraught and I witnessed her sometimes violent behaviour toward my father. On one such occasion, in the middle of the night, after something was thrown through a window in anger by her, I left and wandered down to the ocean, only a few hundred meters from where we then lived in Ventura, California. I was probably about fourteen years old. Distressed, I went and sat on a rock jetty. Gradually I began to notice my surroundings. Schools of anchovies jumped in the light of the moon reflecting on the sea's surface. After a while, clouds floated across the sky and obscured the moon. The stars intensified. Even the Milky Way galaxy appeared, since there was less light pollution from the city back then. As I sat there, the travails at home, behind me, retreated from my mind, and I realized – and have known ever since – how tiny and insignificant we are. And I felt viscerally how wondrous and beautiful the world is, especially when one can look at it with the madness of the human world out of sight, as it is when we stare at a great wild ecosystem, like the ocean. I found myself feeling, despite the pain on the family front, that there was something right and good about the universe. The experience left me with a lifelong understanding that, in the big picture, my own travails, and

that of my species, were of little ultimate significance. This realization has been liberating.

I blundered on coping with the problems at home, largely without adult supervision, and ended up finding people who cared about me among evangelical Christians. Their concern may have been foremost with my soul but they were good to me. My years within that religious tradition probably kept me out of some trouble. When I was finally able to get my mother stabilized and go away to college, I double-majored in Psychology and Religion. There I encountered the so-called liberation theologians who were inspiring Christians to dramatic, risky and sometimes violent acts in resistance to authoritarian and plutocratic regimes, as well as other Christians who took seriously the non-violent teachings of Jesus. Convinced that, despite their different approaches, these approaches to Christianity were trying to promote a more just world, I became a Christian social activist and entered an evangelical Protestant seminary. There I participated with other activists battling nuclear power and weapons technologies, resisting US policies in Central and South America, and promoting disinvestment in companies doing business in apartheid South Africa.

Despite finding a small activist community, I lost my Christian faith while there. My mind could not accept the existence and goodness of the angry, capricious God of Abraham, who would order the slaying of entire populations during war, permit rape and slavery, and demand that humans be loyal and engage in blood sacrifice to appease him. I concluded that if there were such a God, the only moral stance would be to stand against Him in abject resistance.

Even if the tradition's theodicy (theological jargon for efforts to explain why a powerful god allows bad things to occur) could have convinced me of the existence and goodness of a universe-governing god, I was also coming to see that concern about something I cared about was almost entirely missing from the tradition: a valuation of wild organisms and biologically diverse ecosystems. This concern grew after high school when I became a California State Park Lifeguard, spending a great deal of time in the ocean, which I still consider my first love.

One thing that was especially impactful during my lifeguard career was learning, and observing, that the pesticide DDT had killed off most of California's brown pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*). Indeed, they had disappeared from the coast by the time I started lifeguarding, which was in 1973, the same year this poison was banned. It was not until about 1980 that the few survivors from a rookery on the offshore Channel Islands began repopulating the coast. Like many surfers and ocean lovers I was fond of these seabirds. I had spent many hours watching them, considering their playfulness and intelligence. I imagined them as kindred spirits. Their near extinction and dramatic recovery made a big impression on me.

During my Park Service years I would often seek solitude after the intense and busy summer season through solo backpacking trips in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Since I had been there over many years, I was able to see the expansion of human settlements, the increasing air pollution, and the scars from logging and grazing. I also began to learn more about the ecological dimensions of these insults, such as the way air pollution was threatening the Sierra's remaining ancient redwoods, the *Sequoiadendron giganteum* (commonly known as the giant sequoia). I learned as well that the fish we enjoyed catching and eating were put into lakes where they never existed previously, all for the pleasure of anglers like me (and the profits of those catering to us). But these fish were feeding on the insects that native amphibian species needed to survive. At a visceral level that just did not seem right.

Although my concern about such dynamics was growing during the 1980s while I pursued a PhD in ethics, none of my teachers and few of my fellow students seemed to care about issues like that, let alone the emerging environmental crisis itself. Only later would I learn that the legal theorist Christopher Stone, who

"One thing that was especially impactful during my lifeguard career was learning, and observing, that the pesticide DDT had killed off most of California's brown pelicans."

wrote the seminal article, 'Should trees have standing' (Stone, 1972; 1974), arguing that humans should be allowed to speak up for other species, was a professor at the University of Southern California, where I was studying.

The lack of mentors interested in the environment led me to perk up when, in about 1987, I began to notice stories about an Earth First! movement battling to defend forests and wildlife in the western US, even using extra-legal tactics developed by the anti-war, anti-nuclear and civil rights movements. I began to get the movement's publications and realized that they were expressing feelings I had, but that few around me shared. So, soon after finishing my PhD (in 1988), I decided that I would study this movement, using it as a muse for my then underdeveloped *environmental* ethics.

I am still writing about this movement and my entanglement with it, and so here I will just mention three memorable moments that occurred during this research.

In 1989 I assumed a position at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh; the following summer I attended my first Earth First! wildlands gathering, which was held in a National Forest in Northern Wisconsin. After approximately 30 activists gathered around a campfire, a songfest commenced. The first song sung was *I Am an Animal*, by the environmental balladeer Dana Lyons (www.danalyons.com). Funny, and sung in a kind of erotic way, its chorus and verses declared that we are animals, like other animals; we are wild like them; we eat, dance and love like them. The song also celebrated plants and ended with long and loud howls from the assembled *Homo sapiens*.

Hearing this song I recognized that it was a kind of ritual of inclusion in the way it blurred the line between humans and other organisms. And, personally, the song struck a chord within me with its emphasis on our own animality. Looking back with some embarrassment, I must acknowledge that, despite having received a decent education in the biological sciences and understanding the explanatory power of the theory of evolution, I had not *really* considered myself an animal. I had to ask myself why. Perhaps, I thought, it was because in mainstream society, people regularly speak in ways that distinguish humans from animals. Perhaps it was because the dominant religions of the world draw a sharp distinction between humans and other organisms, in part as a strategy of cognitive distancing from them, so we could more easily be indifferent to their well-being and the health of the ecosystems they depend on. I was reminded that the world's religions typically and self-servingly consider our own species to be of greater value than other ones. Around that campfire that night, I began a long pondering of the implications of these thoughts.[1]

"Looking back with some embarrassment, I must acknowledge that, despite having received a decent education in the biological sciences and understanding the explanatory power of the theory of evolution, I had not *really* considered myself an animal."

Because these Earth First! activists were arguing that human beings were precipitating a massive extinction event, and because ethics requires one to figure out what the values *and* facts are that are pertinent to a given issue, I began to read widely in the environmental sciences. Especially influential were understandings emerging from conservation biology and island biogeography. It did not take long for me to realize that human beings, through the devastating impact of such activities as logging, mining, river damming and road-building, were driving untold species off the planet, and that anthropogenic climate change was looming as possibly the most critical extinction driver yet. I also began to understand where and why some bioregions are exceptionally rich in biodiversity and biomass, and are thus particularly important to conserve, especially if conservation is motivated by ecocentric values.

I attended another wildlands gathering during the summer of 1991 in Vermont; while sitting in a meadow through many workshops, I was stunned by the number and beauty of all the insects who would alight upon me and my neighbours. This reinforced what I had been reading about the importance and value of biodiversity, and that generally speaking, lower elevation habitats were more important for biodiversity conservation than the alpine environments I had come to love in California.

These are some of the more personal experiences that I consider significant in my own journey to ecocentrism. But they did not occur alone: they were shaped in a complex way by intensive reading of the emerging corpus of scholarship in environmental history and ethics. At that time, the late 1980s and early 1990s, the corpus was still small, which made it relatively easy to catch up. The usual suspects had their influences: Thoreau, Muir, Carson and Leopold, of course, but many others as well, including those developing various subfields in environmental studies. I also spent considerable time investigating the obstacles to, and possibility of, religious individuals and groups promoting ecologically and socially adaptive behaviours. Most influential on me were those writers who were clearly grounding their ethics in evolutionary and ecological understandings, which tend to erode ideologies of human supremacy. In these understandings, as complemented by my growing ecological understanding, I found a compelling ethics of kinship between humans and all other organisms. Like Darwin intimated, and Leopold drew out explicitly, such an ethics could be based on an understanding that all organisms share a long evolutionary history and a common ancestor. I have come to believe and have argued that through such facts one can build what scholars variously call biocentric, ecocentric or deep ecological ethics (*e.g.* see Taylor [2017]).

The Norwegian philosopher who coined the term 'deep ecology', Arne Naess, once remarked that there are many ways that people can take in order to arrive at the realization that all species have value, even if humanity cannot discern a 'use' for them. This leads me to wonder about many other things that might have played a role in my own path to ecocentrism.

Did the time, when I was in elementary school, when a woodland playground was bulldozed to make way for another housing development, play a role? Until a similar thing, decades later, happened to my own son, who came home heartbroken and angry, I had forgotten about my own experience. His reaction triggered my memory of my own outrage, and how that was dismissed by my parents with a cavalier statement that I remember as, "well, that's progress." At least, remembering this when seeing my son's reaction, helped me to empathize with him, as well as the many activists and thinkers who have told me of similar experiences – no small number of whom have said these were important, if not decisive, in their own ecocentric journeys.

Did the mythic stories by JRR Tolkien about Middle-earth, wherein the hobbits, elves, dwarves, rangers and ents rose up against the forces of world destruction, play a role of arousing a romantic desire to play some heroic role in the saving of our world? I found his books moving and read them several times while a teenager. I later discovered a number of thinkers and activists who were also moved by these stories and consider them important in their own ecocentric journeys.

Have other arts helped to transform people's worldviews and environmental passions? One African American activist told me that he traced his environmental career to the Captain Planet cartoons, noting that there was little nature around his home in Queens, New York, to inspire his concerns. I know still younger ecocentric activists who find inspiration in the heroes and heroines of the Harry Potter novels. Still others have told me they were first moved to action watching the Whale Wars television documentaries, where Sea Shepherd activists risked their lives to save whales and other marine life on the high seas. I expect soon to meet young activists who found the motion picture *Avatar* an important part of their own awakening to environmental concerns and indigenous rights (*cf.* Taylor, 2013).

I have also found, both in books and interviews, that many ecocentrics have had, sometimes for reasons similar to my own, difficulty connecting to and trusting members of their own species. I have a theory about this, which I think, at least for me, holds true: Some who have suffered abuse or neglect from those from whom they most needed love, look for it beyond their own

"Most influential on me were those writers who were clearly grounding their ethics in evolutionary and ecological understandings, which tend to erode ideologies of human supremacy."

kind. We are, after all, social creatures; how could we not seek belonging and connection? So, sometimes, some people find the social connections they need in other creatures. And sometimes such experiences lead people to recognize the agency and value of non-human organisms, which leads in turn to lives of concern and action that extend beyond the human community.

Our lives are, just like the environmental and social systems they belong to, multivariate and complicated. It is not easy to understand ourselves, let alone others. And yet, in sometimes inexplicable and surprising ways, some people fall in love, outward, with all of life. And people defend what they love. ■

Notes

1 I have conducted extensive research to assess claims that this or that of the world's predominant religions do or do not promote pro-environmental values and behaviours. My reluctant conclusion is that that only a small proportion of their devotees (whatever the tradition) end up with strong environmentally friendly beliefs and action priorities. The partial exception is that a greater proportion of indigenous societies have developed ecologically and socially adaptive perceptions and practices. See Taylor (2016) and Taylor *et al.* (2016); see also Taylor (2010).

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Stoppings on my path to ecocentrism

Victor Postnikov

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Victor is a poet, essayist and translator based in Kiev, Ukraine.

Citation

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Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

L'île mystérieuse (*The Mysterious Island*) by Jules Verne was undoubtedly my favourite book in early adolescence (and still is). Now, in retrospect, 60 years later, I like to think that this book eventually put me on an ecocentric path. It's curious and symbolic that, as a child, I was fascinated much more by Verne's description of a magical island, its terrain and habitat, than by the inventiveness of one of the principal characters, engineer Smith, who used his knowledge to 'civilize' the island. I wanted it to remain wild. Telegraphs and hydropower stations didn't impress me; dugongs and peccaries did. And while many at my age were enthusiastic about space travel, I was crazy about going to sea.

No wonder that geography was my best-loved subject at school, and the only one where I got A grades. I remember my astonishment when I located two reefs on the map of the Pacific exactly at the spot of the two islands in Verne's novel. At twelve, I started writing my own sea novel about a journey in a submarine (I was the captain, of course) to the said reefs; the apex of the story was the discovery of the hull of the *Nautilus*, still lying in an underwater crevice.

Later, my childish imagination was further fuelled by an extinguished volcano in the eastern Crimea, *Karadag* (Black Mountain, in the Turkic language), where I stayed with my parents in summers. Fantastic bays, cornelians, underwater sea life; all Jules Verne's fantasies had suddenly materialized in my life. That was my own *l'île mystérieuse par excellence*. But by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the magic bays had become piled with litter. At first, I noticed the absence of crabs; then most of the fish were gone; then the site was declared a sanctuary and off-limits. I was downhearted, but had to admit that people should be kept away from this sacred place.

Chernobyl, the collapse of the Soviet Union and systems sciences

A far ruder awakening came with the Chernobyl catastrophe. For the first time, I felt the enormity of the problem with unbridled technology. Immediately after the catastrophe, I decided to lecture on ecology in the Polytechnic. I hungrily started to look for the 'green' literature that was only just beginning to trickle into the Soviet Union; in general I became far more receptive towards ecology and politics.

My professional interest at that time, as a scientist, was focused on methods for calculating electromagnetic fields in multilayer structures (comprising electrical machines, devices *etc.*). Similar research was being conducted in some geophysical and astrophysical areas to find a method to detect the composition of cosmic bodies. I had developed an efficient algorithm for cylindrical and spherical bodies, based on the so-called wave-impedance relations. At that time, I shifted to modelling multilayer media of the Earth. It was probably this fusion of modelling global systems and ecology that brought me eventually to systems sciences.

This shift in my scientific focus coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now I understand that the Soviet Union was a neatly tuned complex system, with ideally adjusted parts – ideology, infrastructure, science,

culture, education *etc.* – all working to enhance the system. But systems are not permanent. Chernobyl was the first canary's death, signalling the system's failure. This weakness was caused by poor understanding of the complexity and unpredictability of technical systems.

Today, the collapse of the Soviet Union can easily be explained by the theory of complex systems. According to Joseph Tainter (2003), complex societies collapse because they exhaust their design (their "method of survival") and cannot adapt to the diminishing return on investments. The Soviet Union had overstrained itself because of unreasonable military expenses, gigantic projects, space exploration, indulgence in heavy industry *etc.* – not to mention its obsolete paradigm of social organization. Nature and human systems simply rebelled against the state machine. But at that time (the late 1980s and early 1990s) these truths were not yet clear to me.

> "Chernobyl was the first canary's death, signalling the system's failure."

Around that time, Fritjof Capra, a systems ecologist and physicist, published some remarkable books, including *The Turning Point* (1982) and *Uncommon Wisdom* (1988), which I virtually swallowed. I wrote to him and received valuable publications from his Elmwood institute. Another real eye-opener for me was *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). All this material I treasured and conceived to use for future lectures.

Also, I can't underestimate my growing interest in anarchist and pacifist ideas. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, many previously banned books became accessible. I studied the works of Pyotr Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin and Leo Tolstoy, and was amazed how closely these daring minds came to modern ideas of self-governance and self-reliance (Postnikov, 2004). Thus, gradually, I began departing from my professional interests into the realm of political ecology and philosophy. In 1991, I decided to end my career as a research scientist and return to the Polytechnic, but this time as a lecturer in energy and ecology.

Meeting the like-minded

In 1995, I discovered the America House library (www.americahousekyiv.org) in Kiev, where I could access books by modern philosophers. I used to go and write notes there. *Resisting the Virtual Life* (Brook and Boal, 1995), *The Future Does Not Compute* (Talbott, 1995), *The Web of Life* (Capra, 1996), *The Rights of Nature* (Nash, 1988), *Environmental Ethics* (Rolston, 1988) and *Thinking Like A Mountain* (Seed *et al.*, 1988) were mind-blowing for me – and what's more, they let me know that I was not alone in my 'heresies'. In that library, I also used the internet for the first time. That was akin to an escape from prison. I ran into Jay Hanson's Die-Off website (www.dieoff.org), read critical essays on capitalism and industrialism (capitalism was highly praised where I was, and still is), and found many valuable excerpts from works by William Catton, Howard Odum, James Lovelock, Lewis Mumford, Ivan Illich and other radical thinkers.

However, I didn't find sympathizers among my friends or colleagues. Regretfully, the lectures that I wanted to give at Kiev Polytechnic on energy and ecology were not called for.

The next breakthrough, in the late 1990s, was my acquaintance with the deep ecologists. Through their website, I met David Orton, who invited me to join the international forum of Left Biocentrists. I agreed instantly. Left biocentrism, both philosophy and movement, shares many ideas with ecocentrism and is aimed at the recognition of the rights of non-humans as being on a par with those of humans (Orton, 1998). It is also bluntly anti-capitalism and anti-industrialism. Today, it has flowered into many sister movements worldwide, and discussions are still ongoing, although David and Arne Naess are no longer with us. For the last fifteen years, this forum has brought together many like-minded people: philosophers, activists, poets and ecologists. We have enriched each other's

thinking, despite sometimes heated debates. And I will always remember David's openness and fearlessness of mind.

In 2004, I decided to meet Fritjof Capra, come rain or shine. Fritjof would come from Berkeley to the celebrated Schumacher college in the UK (www.schumachercollege.org.uk) to lecture on systems sciences. Unfortunately, I couldn't meet him there, but was lucky to attend another wonderful course, "Earth, Spirit and Action", in which I revelled. John Seed and Ruth Rosenheck conducted a Council of All Beings; Starhawk lectured on permaculture and methods for countering the police with green magic; Alastair McIntosh, a Scottish poet-activist, read TS Eliot and examined Celtic tradition; his wife, Verene Nicolas, gave an introduction to eco-psychology. At this course I also met two exceptional deep ecologists, Stephan Harding and Brian Goodwin.

In the college, someone spoke enthusiastically about the Findhorn ecovillage (www.ecovillagefindhorn.com) in Scotland. I eventually visited that place seven times, secretly hoping to remain there for good. Upon returning home to Ukraine, I found how hard it was to share this experience with other people, for many were already struggling for survival. All that I narrated seemed to them like a fairy tale.

David Orton had acquainted me with yet another remarkable man, Douglas R Tompkins, the co-founder of the world-famous companies Esprit and The North Face. Having earned millions, he abandoned his luxury urban life, purchased vast virgin lands in Argentina and Chile and turned them into nature reserves and parks. He developed a concept of the 'next economy', a simple and harmonious way of living, with beauty at the core of his philosophy (Tompkins, 2015). He was one of my heroes. He also helped me to publish Russian translations of two profound thinkers, William Catton (2006) and Jerry Mander (2007). I will never forget a heartfelt meeting in Kiev with Doug and his wife Kristine. Driving across Ukraine, he examined the soil and was frustrated by the fact that it was too polluted for organic farming. We talked a lot about future plans for rejuvenating the Earth, but a tragic accident cut short his extraordinary life. He was a kindred spirit.

Ecopoetry, the last station

Poetry has always been a bulwark for me. My interest in ecopoetry probably stems from my father's love for Walt Whitman. Against all the odds, and despite the difficulties of life in the former Soviet Union, that love made him unsinkable. Poetry has saved me, too, from burning out. The 'inhuman' poetry of Robinson Jeffers, DH Lawrence and Emily Dickinson has enriched my life to an extent that no books by philosophers or scientists ever did.

Poetry has an intimate connection to beauty. Over the years, I – and not I alone – have come to the conclusion that it is the insensitivity to beauty that has brought us to a systemic crisis, and eventually may cause a universal die-off. Do we have the energy – and more importantly, the will – to eliminate all the ugliness that humanity has accumulated over the aeons?

L'île Mystérieuse ends with the explosion of the island. Could it be a secret allegory of the doomed Earth which haunted Jules Verne? After all, Jules Verne turned out to be correct in many of his visions of the future. ■

"My interest in ecopoetry probably stems from my father's love for Walt Whitman. Against all the odds, and despite the difficulties of life in the former Soviet Union, that love made him unsinkable."

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A responsive world: Personal reflections

Freya Mathews

I grew up surrounded by gentle animals on what today would be described as a 'hobby farm', a three-acre property situated on the rural outskirts of Melbourne in south-eastern Australia. These animals included dogs and cats, ducks, geese, hens and, at one stage, a pet turkey. The main focus of my entire childhood, however, was my ponies. My first pony, Trotty, and those who came after her, Nola and Kazan, were my day-long playmates and confidants. It was to them that I recited my earliest poems, and to them that I ran when I was troubled or excited. They nuzzled me in the same soft, considerate way whatever the occasion. I chose their company not for want of family and friends, but for its own sake. The form of intimacy that grew up between us was qualitatively different from anything that could have developed between myself and human persons. It was a kind of uncluttered closeness, or being-with, which existed despite the fact that our subjectivities were, in terms of content, mutually unknowable. We took it for granted, on either side, that this unknowability did not matter, that our psyches could touch and pervade each other, without need for explanations or self-disclosures, such as those conveyable by language. These horses were, for me, 'primary others' in the psychoanalytic sense; they were not substitutes for, but additional to, significant humans, nor could humans substitute for them. I learned from them, and from the rest of my animal family, that sociality greatly exceeds the human, and that one is always in the presence of potentially communicative and companionable others, even when one is supposedly 'alone'. By them I was also opened up to alternative, non-human ways of seeing things, and, on horseback, I was carried into dimensions of landscape not otherwise discoverable – into a country beyond roads, beyond fences and beyond human limits. When I try to imagine my childhood now, one image recurs – a kind of distillation of all that those early years meant and still mean to me: it is an image of myself astride my pony in a huge, high, luminous, rapturous, slightly shimmering (and now totally lost) land- and sky-scape.

Domestic animals were not the only non-human influences shaping my sense of self and world in those days. There were also kindly ancient manna gums (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) on our land. We knew they dated from before colonization because they bore canoe scars in their trunks. Birdlife was abundant. I was particularly aware of the herons that stood sentinel on the white stag trees that littered the paddocks. Interestingly dangerous reptiles occasionally turned up under bits of scrap metal or in one's path. Large wetlands nearby often wreathed our house in mist. But the greatest of these varied joys was the creek – our very own, steeped in irresistible mystery for me, yet at the same time busy and loquacious, swirling with news of other unknown yet connected places. All these palpably purposeful elementals contributed to my sense of a world of communicative presences beyond the circle of human congress.

Nor was my childhood home the only place that turned my psyche outward in this way. There was also an old sheep station, Daisy Plains, located in the vast arid hinterland of New South Wales, where I occasionally spent school holidays. Daisy Plains was the home of a friend of mine, Sheila, who boarded during term time in Melbourne. Named for the little white everlastings that, in rare wet seasons, carpeted the plains, it was no ordinary sheep station, but, even in those days, a relic of an earlier era. Sheila's

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father, an old-timer with a gaze as blue and far as the desert sky, had been born and raised on the property, and he ran the place in the pre-mechanical style, with the aid of stock ponies, dogs and horse-drawn buggies. We children were out all day in the searing sun on the saltbush plains, lunching out of battered tuckerboxes, riding in stockmen's saddles, racing our ponies, chasing kangaroos, emus and wild pigs with delirious excitement. Back at the homestead, animals filled our every waking moment: there were sheep and lambs, pigs, a flock of diminutive long-haired bush goats, an army of dogs, legions of chooks, ducks and geese, and, at different times, tame emus and kangaroos. An old white goat named Snowy and a cocoa-coloured, hand-reared filly clattered about on the wide back veranda. A sack containing a recently orphaned joey usually hung from the clothes line over the enormous wood-fired stove in the kitchen.

"Back at the homestead, animals filled our every waking moment."

The animal-centredness of life at Daisy Plains did not preclude unabashed slaughter and brutality as part of the daily round. From my saddle I witnessed mother kangaroos being torn to shreds by the station's dogs; emus, in flight from our young stockman friends, failing to clear a fence, becoming entangled in the wire instead, only to be bludgeoned to death with a fence-post; and in the stock yards, young pigs uttering torture-chamber screams as their throats were cut and their still-convulsing bodies dumped into troughs of scalding water. I sat with the other kids in the back of a jeep on a nocturnal kangaroo-shooting excursion, and as the bodies piled up under our feet, I remember the blood of the kangaroos soaking my green felt boots dark red. The cruelty shocked me to the core – in fact, it was this which first made me aware of my core, a still, silent, inner place of watching, beyond speech. But it did not diminish the overwhelming sense of enchantment that this place awakened in me. For the enchantment, and the heightened feeling of being alive that accompanied it, arose from the fact that animals, and the uncompromising land which decided their fate, were the almost exclusive focus of everyone's life there, and the carnage, for all its horror, was part of that visceral involvement.

When I was fifteen, my family moved into the city, and both my rural life and my visits to Daisy Plains ceased. But the sense of inner affinity with the natural world I had experienced till then continued. It did not give rise to a scientific interest in the details of living systems and how their components fitted together. Nor was I even a proto-naturalist, identifying species, totting up observations, assembling a solid body of empirical knowledge. The affinity was always more emotionally charged than that, more immersive – indeed, more metaphysical. In my teenage years it found expression in a great outpouring of drawings, stories and poetry. If I had known about Aboriginal Dreamings at that time, I would have recognized my own proto-consciousness in them. But this was still the era of the Great Australian Silence about all things Aboriginal, and as far as I was concerned Aborigines belonged to a past as remote as Captain Cook and the dinosaurs. Nonetheless, something in my experience – something still inchoate, inarticulate, but informed with that astonishing unconscious fore-knowledge that adolescents often have of their adult lives – was pulling me towards the notion of the indigenous: at the age of sixteen I took a journey, on my own, to Rabaul in New Guinea. This was the 1960s, and New Guinea was still an Australian protectorate. For two months I worked for board and lodging in missions deep in the jungle, travelling in the back of crowded trucks to gatherings where men would dance barefoot on burning coals; eating python meat by the light of fireflies; exploring the simmering, sulphurous craters of active volcanoes; encountering a people still embedded in a pre-industrial tradition of exuberant ecological prosperity, despite ominous overlays of colonialism. I realized then with great clarity that this was where I, as a young writer, belonged, at the interface of the modern and the indigenous.

But, unfortunately, life took a different turn. At the age of eighteen, I found myself, incongruously, in "swinging London". I moved in with friends who leased a top-

storey studio in the grand old Pheasantry Club on the King's Road in Chelsea, and soon I was trapped in the life that circumstances had led me, reluctantly, to embark upon there. The apartment was without a garden, without the slightest glimpse of green from its high windows. The Pheasantry was legendary as one of the nerve-centres of the London 'underground'. Artists, writers and rock musicians congregated in our apartment, and every night till dawn the entire building was shaken with musical reverberations from the nightclub in the basement. People were embarked on what were for them exciting adventures with sex and drugs. With comings and goings at all hours, residents and visitors alike were charged to the eyeballs with the fizz of glamour, the intoxication of notoriety and celebrity.

I alone, it seemed, languished. I felt deadened. Without any trees in sight, with all presence and memory of animals expunged from this world, without even a proper sky above me (the London sky appearing more like a low ceiling than the soaring invitation to infinity to which I was accustomed in Australia), I felt truly 'underground', buried alive. My spirit, with its lifelong habit of expansiveness, had to submit for the first time to grey urban confinement, to a world built exclusively to human specifications, in which no court of appeal existed beyond socially prescribed perceptions and perspectives. There was here no turning out to a wider world of subtle voices and signals, a world of myriad – at first indiscernible, but with patient attention increasingly differentiated – responsive presences. Rather, there was a turning-in, and a turning-up of the volume of human-generated and human-directed self-infatuated cacophony and chatter. This turning-in found its ultimate expression in the essential project of the counter-culture: to transform reality into an inner picture show, a spectacle of hallucinatory images and sexually induced sensations orchestrated for our private entertainment. This project was, in fact, nothing more than a hip rendition of the old transcendental idealism or solipsistic anthropocentrism of the Western tradition, which places reality in us rather than us in reality.

I had no words, at the time, to name this human introjection of reality, or to justify my sense of exile from a world that was truly alive, and, unlike the one in which I found myself, a source of true enlivenment. I especially had no words to challenge the high claims of Art on which the counter-culture rested. Instead, I kept some snails and bare twigs in a jar in my study, and gazed at them for months. I retreated into a state of fantasy and intense creativity, writing and drawing obsessively, calling up from my own deep unconscious the images and motifs I needed to survive. I composed song cycles and stories of origins, though I was only just beginning to learn about Aboriginal Dreamings. I hung around antique stores and antiquarian book shops, seeking out illustrations, old paintings, fairy and folk tales, that could be threaded into my nascent mythologies. I haunted the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, with its layer upon layer, colonnade after colonnade, of magical animal statuary. Whenever I found a numinous image – an old French engraving of a lone seal, for instance, or a Chinese painting of wild geese – I enshrined it, hanging it as an icon in the gallery of my mind. Out of such gathered fragments, and out of my own memory, imagination and dreams, I tried to recreate the sense of enchantment that had always been the essence of my experience of the world, and without which I found life scarcely worth living.

From the viewpoint of Western psychoanalysis, this sense of enchantment is regressive, and signals a failure of individuation in infancy. But to adopt this point of view is surely to beg the metaphysical question. Looking back on my early years now, it seems more plausible to assume that the ample opportunities for close communion with animals and elemental aspects of landscape that were available to me as a child had opened me to a larger world, a world astir with presence or presences that vastly exceeded the human.

After a year or so in the UK I enrolled in a philosophy degree at the University of

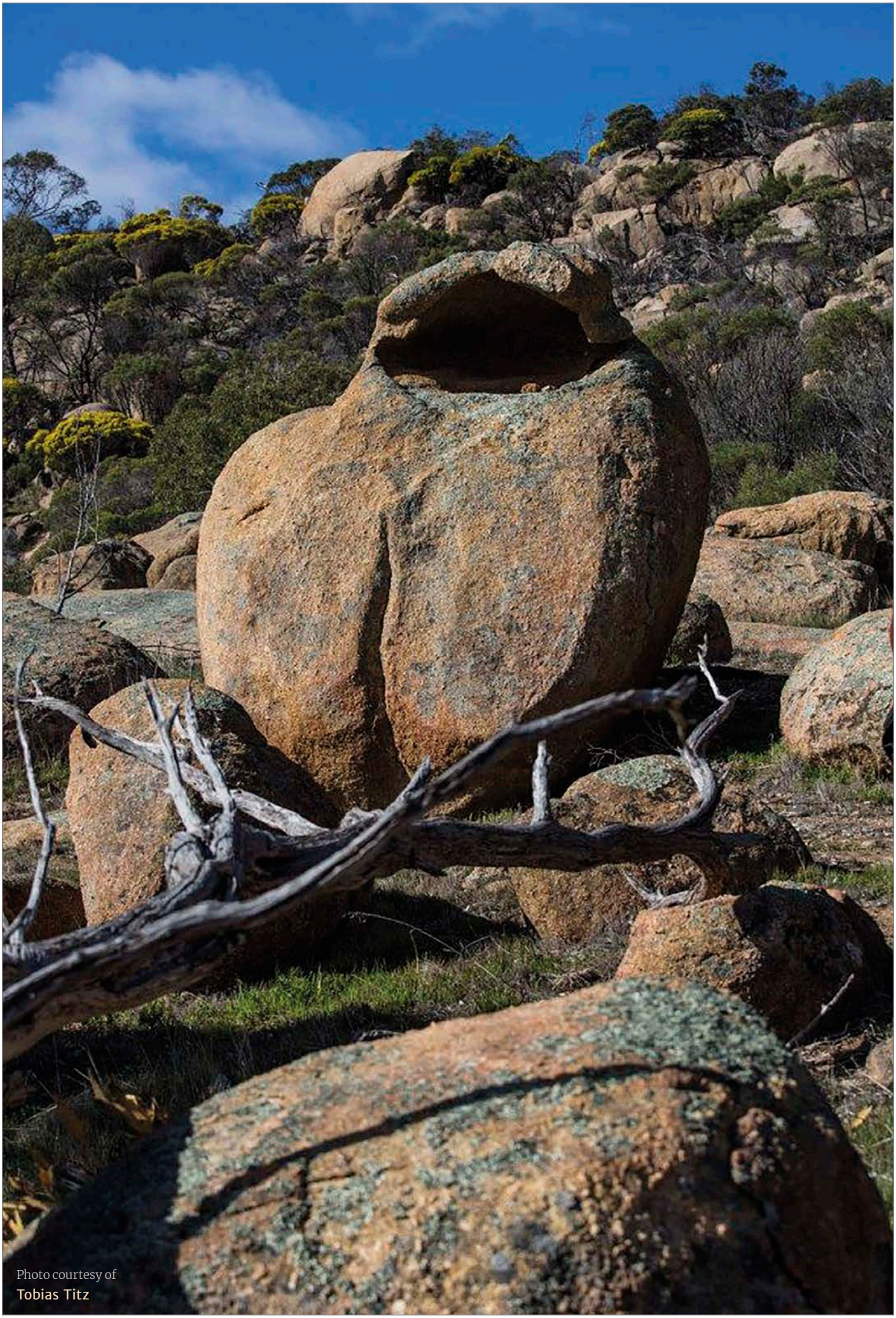
"Without any trees in sight, with all presence and memory of animals expunged from this world, without even a proper sky above me, I felt truly 'underground', buried alive."

London, more for the purpose of renewing my visa than out of any enthusiasm for the cold analytical philosophy that reigned supreme in Britain (and Australia) at that time. At Bedford College I was a wayward student, eschewing lectures but voraciously reading the old anthropology books I found in the library stacks. It was in those old books, particularly Levy Bruhl and a swathe of out-of-date ethnographies of Australian Aborigines, that I at last found hints of what I had unconsciously been looking for: the notion of *participation mystique*, for instance, and views of the world as suffused with a meaning dimension – a Dreaming dimension. Eventually a kindly tutor, Doreen Tulloch, the only woman amongst the Bedford College Philosophy staff, understood me and led me back to the 17th century, to metaphysics, viewed through the visionary lenses of Spinoza and Leibniz. I embraced Spinoza like a lost lover from the depths of time, a philosopher who holds up a lantern to show the deserted path the West did not but could have travelled. I must say my immersion in the mind of Spinoza, at the age of 21, felt like an experience of direct transmission, and I have remained a faithful and lovingly grateful Spinozist ever since.

"I embraced Spinoza like a lost lover from the depths of time, a philosopher who holds up a lantern to show the deserted path the West did not but could have travelled."

Long before this encounter with Spinoza, however, or the first tentative steps in my lifelong, still unfinished journey towards the Aboriginal cosmos, it was, as I have explained, my intimate communion as a child with animals that opened me to pervasive presence and purpose. Once one was attuned to such presence, it was natural to expect it not merely from animals but from all the elements of the natural environment. There was no obvious reason to portion it out or draw hard-and-fast boundaries around its instances. There was therefore every reason to anticipate a certain diffuse responsiveness from reality at large. It was this presumption that the world, when invoked in good faith, would respond, that defined for me then the sense of enchantment. And this presumption has not been disappointed in my later life, though I have learnt that things will not necessarily respond in the manner one anticipates or with the results for which one hopes. One should certainly not, in my view, rely on the world to fulfil requests or afford protection. But if one entreats it simply to reveal itself, to engage in an act of communication, then, in my experience, it will generally do so, though in its own ever-unpredictable way. This assurance has always filled my whole being with a sense of being accompanied, of never being alone, a sense of background love, akin to the background radiation of which physicists speak. This is a love which has nothing to do with saving us from death and suffering, or with making us happy. From the viewpoint of reality at large, death and suffering are just inevitable concomitants of individual life. The point for individuals, from this perspective, is not to seek to evade these inevitabilities, but to reach beyond them – to call into the silence beyond human selfhood in search of a reply. This is the moment for which the world has been waiting, and in which it will rejoice: the moment when we ask it to speak. To receive its reply is to enter a love far greater than the kind of protection and indulgence that our traditional importunate forms of prayer expect, for that reply signifies that we belong to an animate order, a pattern of meaning, from which neither death nor any other form of personal obliteration can separate us.

One might describe such an outlook as panpsychist rather than merely ecocentric – and as a cosmological form of panpsychism at that. It construes our existence as part of a larger normative pattern that sustains not only the biosphere but the cosmos itself. Much later in life I did begin to acquire a more literally ecological consciousness by way of an on-the-ground conservation project that required me to get down on all fours, so to speak, and make the acquaintance of a particular stone mountain in all its floral and faunal – ecological – detail. This is an ongoing adventure, and has opened up for me new orders of revelation. But the more eco-empirical registers of consciousness that are resulting from it remain, in my case, nested within that earlier affective cosmocentrism, which has totally shaped and infused every aspect of my life. ■



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Tobias Titz

Coming to ecocentrism

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West Covina, part of the suburban sprawl of Southern California, was recently chosen as the location for the sitcom *Crazy Ex-girlfriend* based on its "cheery banality" (Shyong, 2018). That is where I grew up. When I was ten, we moved further inland to the town of Upland at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, home of the last recorded Stage Three smog alert in the nation. That was 1974 and I was a sophomore in high school, accustomed to tightness in my chest and tingling in my gums and the presence of smog as part of my immediate environment.

I was taught to be wary of the natural world. Without knowing it, my mother repeated the same instructions about sweet gum seed pods as the mom in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*: "Never, never throw them at anyone. They can put an eye out." To my parents, transplanted New Yorkers, Central Park was the ideal place to spend time in nature. Anything else made them jittery. In its particulars, nature was alien; in its expanse, it was an impressive backdrop to the human story.

Still, we went camping for two weeks at a time to some of the most splendid places on Earth – Lake Tahoe, King's Canyon, and Yosemite – because it was "good to get out of the house" and it was a vacation we could afford.

We didn't fish or bird watch or canoe or collect bugs, but my mother took us for day hikes. My father said he'd had enough hiking across north Africa and Italy in the war, so he stayed in camp, working on a pot of coffee and the *L.A. Times* crossword puzzle. We also spent a lot of time playing canasta at the picnic table. Our flannel sleeping bags were never quite warm enough and I dreaded getting ready for bed at night and getting out of bed in the morning. But somehow, being outside and away from suburban life was, as my mother intuited, very good for us, though even now it's hard to articulate why. I think it had something to do with refocusing our attention and uncramping us from our normal routines.

There was, nonetheless, a lot of yelling that accompanied these trips. My older sister was unhappy most of the time. My father was on his usual short fuse, with no way to escape to the office. I remember sitting on the rough bench of the picnic table, wondering how we were going to fill all the hours of the day, but also just breathing and listening to a world that was bigger than my home life. The fact that these crazy camping trips had a positive influence on my life says a good deal about the power of the natural world to shape the human psyche for good.

As with origami, there are dozens of folds and creases that give life its shape. I read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1974) the summer before my senior year in college and though I only dimly understood it, I was stunned by its message. It seemed so right that thinking and feeling belonged together, as did ethics and aesthetics, and art and technology. Pirsig was my first dose of the problem with dualisms of all kinds and the importance of intrinsic value in overcoming them. I didn't know then that Pirsig was consciously aligning himself with the radical empiricists, most especially Whitehead. But when I first encountered Whitehead's statement that, "The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty" (Whitehead, 1933: 341) it was like meeting the face I had before I was born.

In fact, it is Whitehead's philosophy and the process school of thought that have provided the foundation for my fidelity to ecocentrism. Whitehead's entire philosophy is based on a reintroduction of value into the world. Reintroducing value to the world deposes materialism and its claim that the really real things that make up the world are senseless and valueless units of some quantifiable measure. "It is the essence of life," writes Whitehead, "that it exists for its own sake, as the intrinsic reaping of value" (Whitehead, 1938: 184). Pan-valuism clearly implies ecocentrism.

I happily attest also to the enormous influence of my lifelong mentor, John B Cobb Jr, on my intellectual life. I went to Claremont Graduate University (in California) to study process thought with him, and ever since I have followed the widening currents of his theological commitment to creative transformation. From his 1972 book, *Is it Too Late?*, to his ground-breaking book on steady-state economics with Herman Daly, *For the Common Good*, to his shattering critiques of all institutions that undermine life systems (more than 50 books), John Cobb has been a leading voice in the movement to create eco-civilizations.

It was because of John that I began reading Lester Brown's *State of the World* books in the 1980s. John had included them as assigned reading for his classes in philosophy and religion, making global environmental issues a matter for theological concern. Reading about the serious decline in topsoil, fresh water and fisheries, about population growth and resource conflicts, among other things, changed the trajectory of my academic career from teaching religious studies to teaching sustainability studies.

I focused on the importance of replacing a mechanistic worldview with an organic or systems worldview. I don't remember when it became clear to me that the reintroduction of beauty as a value is fundamental to creating relations that are worth sustaining. I think it was Charles Hartshorne's assertion that "babies are more beautiful than good" that got me thinking that the same is true for other forms of life. Beauty is the more inclusive values category – and the most basic.

By *beauty*, I don't mean fashion or art, but patterns of relations that engender life. In my opinion, sustainability is not an ultimate goal, just as mere survival does not fully describe the evolutionary process. Complex organisms are, as Whitehead pointed out, "deficient in survival power... [They] certainly did not appear because they were better at that game than the rocks around them" (Whitehead, 1929: 2). So it is with sustainability: mere endurance is not the ultimate objective. A far greater aesthetic–ethical vision informs the practical work of sustainability – a vision that returns values and aliveness into the structure of reality.

In the last ten years, I have struggled to understand how it came to be that we moderns mostly treat beauty as a trivial value. Even those of us who have fallen in love with the beauty of the Earth and its inhabitants find it difficult to speak of the importance of beauty. It is clear to me that the demise of beauty's status as a value inherent in the structure of reality is entangled with the rise of modern, mechanistic science. The 'death of nature' and the demise of beauty are co-victims of this worldview. To resuscitate the one requires the revitalization of the other. Aldo Leopold knew this when he imagined a new kind of science, one that could not be practised without the companionship of ethics and aesthetics. Beauty is fundamental to repairing our relations with life, and the inclusion of beauty leads to a more radical, more profound and more adequate understanding of sustainability.

For nearly 30 years now, I've lived in the high desert community of Flagstaff, Arizona. It is a delicate ecosystem in the 21st year of a long-term drought. It is not clear how long human life can continue on this thin-aired, fire-primed plateau. Its beauty is its holdfast, but most of us here haven't learned to live in ways that do justice to it. We are like children with an attachment disorder, in desperate need

"By *beauty*, I don't mean fashion or art, but patterns of relations that engender life."

of love but unclear how to express it. To repair our relations, to affirm the inherent worth of all beings, to offer tangible and steady affection, requires that we suspend the deep cultural convention that beauty is of negligible importance, and that we make the practice of aesthetic intention an ecocentric principle. ■

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Another route to ecocentrism

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Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

I grew up in Huddersfield in the industrial conurbation of West Yorkshire, living for eighteen years in a council house there. My parents both worked in local factories, my father a lathe operator in an engineering works and mother sewing in a textile mill. Many of my father's relatives, however, lived in Scotland and indeed further north. My father had grown up in the Shetland Isles before World War Two took him into the army.

The contrast between the crowded towns of industrial England and the open spaces around the family croft on Shetland made a big impression on me when we visited there. In retrospect, I now see that the land there, as across most of the British uplands, is a man-made wet desert, thanks to massive deforestation followed by overgrazing of sheep and deer herds as well as grouse moors. On the croft itself, fertilizer applications to enrich the grass have produced extensive eutrophication in the nearby loch.

Those first experiences made me very aware that industrial conurbations were not the only environments in which people could live. The sinking of the oil tanker *Torrey Canyon* in 1967 (still the worst oil spill in the history of the UK) also added to my growing awareness of the human impact and its negative sides. The then-raging Vietnam War spotlighted another side to the world's ills.

In my last year at school, I thought that better land-use management might be one way forward, so I went to study a Town and Country planning degree course at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1968. However, I soon saw the error of my choice, since planning seemed to be all about facilitating more growth, with, if lucky, a few cosmetics to hide its worst features. We were taken on many visits, such as to a motorway construction site, dam building (we were some of the last people to walk along the North Tyne before it was flooded by Kielder Dam, creating the biggest artificial lake in Britain), 'exotic' conifer plantations (again the biggest in Britain), and a heavily mechanized and monocultural farm. All were presented as 'progress'.

A particular turning point for me was a visit to a big new housing scheme that quickly turned into a social disaster. I also read articles and books by *The Observer*'s planning correspondent Ian Nairn, who criticized what he called "subtopia" – drab urban sprawl (Nairn, 1957; Darley, 2019). Britain's towns and cities were indeed being torn apart by developments that Newcastle city planner Wilfred Burn called "new towns for old" (Burns, 1963). It was a wrecking ball on a scale greater than the destruction caused by the *Luftwaffe* in the war (Stamp, 2010). As a teenager, I had seen the process first hand, with fine old Victorian buildings demolished to make way for glass and concrete blocks across the towns and cities of West Yorkshire.

My politics were partly shaped by a great uncle, a former coal miner who had an extensive Left Book Club collection, which I worked my way through. I joined in the Labour Party Young Socialists in time for the 1966 General Election, my first experience of campaigning. In 1968, I joined the International Socialists (now Socialist Workers Party). It regarded the Soviet Union, China and the satellite states of Eastern Europe as 'state capitalist', in no way socialist. For a period, I worked as the full-time district organizer.

Following my eviction, along with many others, from that organisation in the mid-1970s for opposing its 'Leninization', I became involved in various 'solidarity'

campaigns (Chile *etc.*) and helped at a radical bookshop called 'Days of Hope' in downtown Newcastle. In the meantime, I had got a job teaching in a college of further education (mainly sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds, plus some adult 'returners').

During this period, I read *Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith and Allen, 1972) and *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). The two books lodged in my brain the nagging thought that, on a finite planet, there could not be infinite growth. I also heard the American biologist Barry Commoner and the Australian trade unionist Jack Mundey (leader of the 'green bans' movement in Sydney; see Burgmann and Burgmann [2011]) give a joint lecture in 1973. Commoner denied any threat from overpopulation. That position seemed plain daft to me, given that I already realized that more people must put more pressure on a finite and, beyond a certain point, fragile planet. Yet Commoner forcefully explained the dangers of messing around with Mother Earth, and his concept of 'flawed technology' certainly spotlights *some* significant parts of the ecological problem (Commoner, 1971).

During my time at university, I spent every summer working as a relief lock keeper on the River Thames. It too provided more education, this time about the so-called 'tragedy of the commons'. The river was essentially an open-access but finite resource. As a result, more and more people kept hiring or buying boats and trying to sail them on the river. The result was routine congestion, which sometimes, especially on sunny Sundays, led to a very long wait to get through the lock, due to the sheer number of boats. Such growth seemed counter-productive, destroying the very pleasures people sought in the first place. It was also one that could only be resolved by the setting of public limits on boating.

Through the 1970s, my first vague thoughts about the significance of the Earth's life-support systems and the nature of threats to them began to firm up. I did more reading, with Paul Ehrlich, Herman Daly and Edward Goldsmith in particular making a big impact on me. Because I had always enjoyed 'wild' environments, I had no problem in accepting notions about the intrinsic worth of landforms and of individual non-human species, when I came across books that argued this position. Writings by David Ehrenfeld and John Livingston especially impressed me. In contrast, utilitarian, anthropocentric arguments about environmental conservation seemed a limited and limiting standpoint – one that would eventually lead to acquiescence in the destruction of life and landforms not deemed to be 'useful'.

"Utilitarian, anthropocentric arguments about environmental conservation seemed a limited and limiting standpoint – one that would eventually lead to acquiescence in the destruction of life and landforms not deemed to be 'useful'."

By the mid-70s, I had become active in the Newcastle branch of the Socialist Environment and Resources Association, before joining what was then known as the Ecology Party towards the end of the decade. I started to do more writing as well as direct campaigning. That included books, pamphlets and entries for encyclopedias (*e.g.* Irvine, 1989; Irvine and Ponton, 1988). At the start of the 1990s, I was elected to the first national executive of the (renamed) Green Party of England and Wales.

For a number of years I was an Associate Editor of *The Ecologist* magazine. I have contributed articles and reviews to several magazines including *The Ecologist*, *Resurgence* and *Wild Earth*. I have written on many topics, from 'limits to growth' and overpopulation, to environmental education. I also wrote material on media matters for journals in that field, as well as a full-length study of the Ridley Scott film *Gladiator* (Irvine, 2008). At times I tried to combine the themes of film analysis and ecology.

Direct contact with the Earth's marvels has been a truly life-enhancing experience and education for me. Three events stand out in particular. First was a hike through the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve in Canada. At one point, the trail crossed from secondary growth into primal forest. The contrast between the two, between ecological poverty and richness, was striking. The second was a trip out on the Pacific in a little motorboat, in which we found ourselves right next to a huge whale that suddenly surfaced. The magnificence of this creature only underlined the folly of people who destroy the wonders of creation. The third was on another visit to western Canada, when we went for a hike

across Sunshine Meadows near Banff. A Park Ranger there told us that the bears had been driven from the area simply because of the sheer number of people who now regularly hike there (which, of course, included us!).

However the realization was also dawning on me that the environmentalism of *some* so-called 'greens' was actually very shallow. Their agenda is an anthropocentric one and at odds with a serious appreciation of the various social and environmental limits to growth. In particular, many deny the threat from human population growth, as if our numbers do not count. There are also widespread fantasies about the productive power of new technology, coupled to unwarranted faith in 'technofixes'. Thus such people often say that conversion of industry from arms production to more socially useful products would do the trick, not realizing that nature's accounts make no distinction between armoured cars and ambulances. Nor is there proper recognition of the extent of human 'overshoot' and need not just for a 'steady-state' economy but also in several sectors, substantial 'degrowth'.

On this journey to ecocentrism, I met and corresponded with many people who impressed and influenced me. I became friends with Teddy Goldsmith, for example. He was a true polymath and a generous man. His magnum opus, *The Way* (Goldsmith, 1992), is surely a major contribution to the ecocentric canon, though at times it is a bit deterministic in its analysis and makes the mistake of spending too much time looking backwards rather than forwards.

I also corresponded several times with Canadian scientist Stan Rowe. His books (*e.g.* Rowe, 2006) should be on every ecocentric shelf. I did worry, however, when he criticized Aldo Leopold for promoting 'biocentrism' rather than 'ecocentrism'. Stan may have had a point but, to the vast majority of 'outsiders', this debate is a bit like arguments over how many angels can stand on the head of a pin. That said, Stan was right to consider the ethical significance of landforms as well as life forms, geology as well as biology.

At present, I am still an active member of the Green Party on Tyneside and co-chair of the party's regional council, a body with oversight of party strategy, manifesto approval and guardian of its 'well-being'. Its defects notwithstanding, there is no political alternative in the current scene. All the other political parties in the UK are far, far more flawed.

But I've always felt that party politics must also be rooted in 'extra-parliamentary' activities such as mass protests, pickets and boycotts. So I've also been active in several grassroots campaigns, not least against the growth-oriented development plans of local councils. I am a strong supporter of the national pressure group Population Matters (https://populationmatters.org), one of the few organizations in the UK that treats human numbers with the seriousness and urgency they deserve.

We urgently need action for sustainability at all levels by all non-violent means – judicious mixtures of both 'carrot' and 'stick', of both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down'. Certainly, individual lifestyle change and purely voluntary change are far from enough. Though I remain hopeful about the better side of humans, I cannot swallow the romantic image of the masses lodged in the minds of many radicals. There is a lot of empty rhetoric about 'empowerment' and 'direct democracy'. I've always been doubtful whether they are the roads to sustainability, unless other changes – especially at the level of values and goals – accompanied them. The same pattern repeats itself when 'Western' radicals find ways to excuse or deny the part played by other cultures and countries in planetary destruction.

I have come to the general conclusion that the ecological crisis is ultimately a crisis of culture and beliefs. It cannot be reduced to economics, very important though factors such as poverty and injustice can be. The most thoroughly democratic and equitable social system could set totally unsustainable goals. Most people either worship at the shrine of ever-higher consumption or imbibe the poison of religious fundamentalism.

Over rather many years of political activity, I've seen some battles won but

"We urgently need action for sustainability at all levels by all non-violent means – judicious mixtures of both 'carrot' and 'stick', of both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down'."

many more lost. But I've always thought it important to take a stand, whatever the chances of success. Looking back, it now seems so obvious that, even if all these campaigns had been triumphant, none would have achieved anything of lasting value unless we humans find the right relationship to the rest of nature. Furthermore, in each and every one of those campaigns, the particular problem would have been less serious and more easily resolved if humankind had not been so numerous.

I often feel that we have collectively passed the point of no return. The juggernaut of destruction now seems so big and is moving too fast to be stopped before vast and irreparable damage to planet Earth has taken place. The industrialization of countries such as Brazil, China and India, with the explosive growth of the so-called 'new middle class' around the world, is probably that final straw which will break the proverbial camel's back.

I do hope I am wrong! I have to keep reminding myself of the dictum that it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness. ■

"I often feel that we have collectively passed the point of no return. The juggernaut of destruction now seems so big and is moving too fast to be stopped before vast and irreparable damage to planet Earth has taken place."

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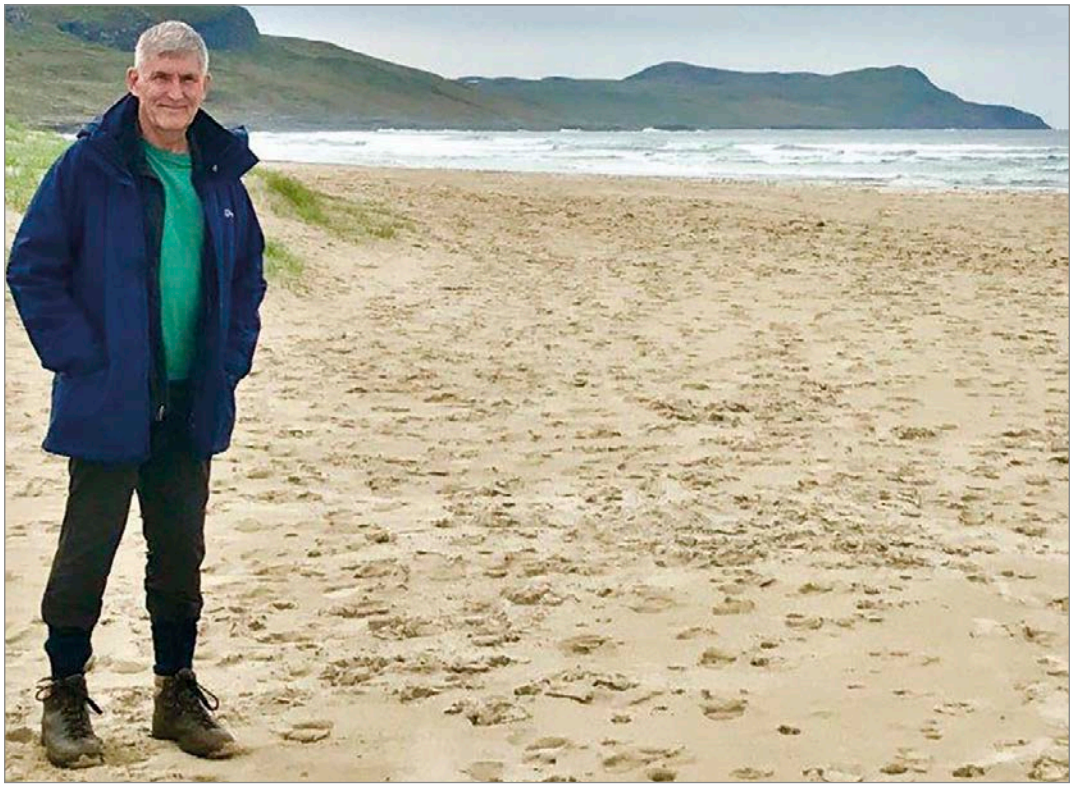

Becoming ecocentric: An ongoing journey of becoming human

Liz Hosken

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Becoming ecocentric

The protea grasslands which nurtured me into existence, just outside Johannesburg in South Africa, no longer exist. The house and the 25 acres of wild land and farmland which were home to me, were bulldozed flat in order to make way for the concrete foundations of a 'secure' townhouse project. The rare indigenous trees, bulbs, grasses and bushes, which my father had painstakingly searched out and cared for over many decades, together with many other species – earthworms, insects, birds and other small animals – also lost their homes, and were killed if they could not escape. This painful story of loss and destruction of home, and the obliteration of memory from the land, is shared by millions of humans and uncountable numbers of our relatives in the web of life. The eras of colonization and globalization sent shockwaves across our planet, leaving displacement and death in their wake. These waves continue today, and the last havens are no longer safe.

The land that was home to me had come to be a haven over the years for many species – including humans. Activists who needed to take refuge from the apartheid regime became gardeners, or keepers of the animals on the small farm, as a cover. They called my father 'the bird man', because he knew and loved birds and their often-quirky characters. One of my great joys was to go into what we call 'the bush', birdwatching with him and (sometimes) his 'birdie friends'. I enjoyed being with them because they knew lots about birds and everyone else – the animals, trees, insects and their intricate connections, which fascinated me. And they liked me to join them because I knew how to be silent and discreet, sometimes even holding my breath with anticipation, which meant I was quick at spotting all manner of birds and other creatures. Along the trails and across the wildlands I would often go ahead as I felt the adults were too clumsy and noisy. I loved being a bit distant from them and their chatter.

These experiences embedded in me a deep feeling for the wild and the free – as if it fed my own yearning to be wild and free. I loved the flow of communication between species, and the sense of community – which was spontaneous and yet orderly. Wherever we went – be it riverine areas, marshes or game reserves in Southern Africa – there was that sense of us entering a community. It was as if all there were speaking to one other – when we humans came, there would be a flutter of concern, as if all were asking "are these ones okay or are they dangerous?" Once this was assessed it felt as if everyone went back to their own business, albeit with a certain alertness, because you never know with humans, they can turn at any moment.

My parents, thankfully, were involved in establishing the first Rudolf Steiner School in Johannesburg, and I was in the first batch of nursery schoolchildren. The Steiner approach is true to the Latin meaning of *educare* – it aims 'to draw out' the innate wisdom in children. Teachers encourage children to follow their interests and inspirations, and mine was playing freely outdoors, on the farm or in the bush.

Overshadowing this wonderous natural world was a heavy dark energy of human minds and hearts obsessed with those who had a different colour skin. The

> "As we are bearing witness today, the toxic mix of these beliefs and the industrial endless-growth economy, legitimized the plundering of our beautiful Earth."

assumptions of power and hierarchy that lie behind the belief that humans with lighter skin were superior to those with darker skin, were applied to all other creatures, indeed to the Earth herself. As we are bearing witness today, the toxic mix of these beliefs and the industrial endless-growth economy, legitimized the plundering of our beautiful Earth. During the 'struggle years' of resisting South Africa's apartheid regime, it felt to me as if this was a rehearsal for a much bigger struggle – a microcosm of what was unfolding across our planet.

I was blessed to grow up with parents who were themselves grappling with the insanity of the dominant thinking and its systems. My mother was involved in 'The Black Sash', a women's movement challenging the apartheid regime in various ways, including lining the streets dressed in black in order to witness and mourn the immoral apartheid system (Black Sash, 2017). At an early age I was also introduced to the classics of the ecological movement – from Rachel Carson's chilling *Silent Spring* (1962), to Ivan Illich's incisive critiques and proposals, such as *Deschooling Society* (1971) and many others. These helped me to feel there was a stream of thought to tap into and draw solace from.

By the time I was eighteen years old I felt I could see what needed to be done, and believed that it was only a matter of time before things would change for the better. I decided to create a more holistic environmental studies course than was on offer, and fortunately Pietermaritzburg University was small and flexible enough to accommodate me. However, I was disillusioned to find that the teaching methodology was infused with the superiority complex which underpins the dominant industrial world. Did they really believe by dissecting a frog you would get to know him or her? And did they really think it was okay to butcher 20 frogs daily for zoology students to cut up as if in a morgue? This was barbaric to me. I soon learnt that this way of thinking was so institutionalized that a few lone voices would not change it. My naive clarity at eighteen crumbled, and I began to wrestle with the question of how systems change.

The immediacy of the horrors of the injustices wrought upon the majority in South Africa pulled me more deeply into the struggle against apartheid. But after some years I had to make a tough decision and leave my homeland. This was a shocking experience as my roots were deeply connected to the African soil. However, as I explored the island known as 'the United Kingdom' I found more wild places than I had expected – the Western Isles, the Scilly Isles, the Welsh coast – and I experienced the beauty of Mother Earth's expression in a totally different way.

Here, off the coast of Wales, I met one of my great teachers, Simo the dolphin, before he became famous amongst humans and disappeared. For some years I would pilgrimage to meet with him regularly. There is so much I could share, but most important is simply the experience of being with a being with a much greater consciousness than my own. I knew Simo could read my mood and what I was thinking, just as he could do with other humans. He behaved differently with each person who met him and swam with him, giving them 'the medicine' they needed. I had moments of deep connection and intimacy with him where we would lie together in the water, as he drew me into what was for me an altered state of consciousness. For him it was the way he was. There were other moments where he could feel my ego getting out of hand as I introduced him proudly to friends, and he came over and flipped me deep into the water with his tail fin. Simo, and other animal teachers, showed me clearly that humans are certainly not the consciousness of the Earth, as some would claim.

I also met some important human mentors in the 1980s when people were gathering across our planet to reflect on four decades of 'development' and how social and ecological injustices

were getting worse. It was in these gatherings that I met more of what I call 'my spirit family'. Wangari Maathai from Kenya became a close sister; Jose 'Lutz' Lutzenberger, later recognized as the father of the Brazilian environment movement, was a very important mentor for me; Joanna Macy, who connects many worlds in powerful and practical heart–mind shifting ways; Jules Cashford who brings together the perennial wisdom across cultures; Ed Posey, another connector of people and places, who later co-founded the Gaia Foundation with me and others (see www.gaiafoundation.org). Through Lutz, as he was fondly known, the Gaia Foundation's first phase was to unfold in the Amazon Rainforest with indigenous communities. This laid the basis for my own path and that of the Foundation going forward.

In Brazil I met Ailton Krenak, a fiercely outspoken indigenous leader who introduced me to many indigenous traditions and their profound relationship with the land from which they were born, and the forces that animate life. He spoke poetically about the memory indigenous people hold of how humans need to participate consciously within the web of life, to live according to Mother Earth's laws. He emphasized the importance of building 'affectionate alliances' between indigenous peoples and others from the dominant world who are concerned about the critical condition of life on our planet. Hearing this was like a homecoming for me. It gave me hope that this memory of who we are – Earthlings amongst others – could be revived, even in European cultures. After all, it was they who once knew Mother Earth as Gaia, the "foundation of all life" (Anon, 2003).

Ailton also introduced me to the *Asháninka* indigenous community in Acre, in the north-west Brazilian Amazon, who invited me to participate in their regular *Ayahuasca* ceremonies where I met the world of plant teachers for the first time. This too was an experience of connecting to the consciousness that permeates life, the place that Simo had taken me to. What an awesome planet, where these extraordinary plant and animal relatives have such wisdom to share with us if we are open to it! I wished for a way to get more humans to have this experience – to get a perspective on ourselves and our place in this beautiful universe.

My next place of learning was with indigenous peoples in the Colombian Amazon, who were on a journey of reviving their knowledge and traditions, which had been shattered by traders and missionaries over decades. I was privileged to accompany them, together with Colombian ethnologist Martin Hildebrand, for some years. Their priority was to revive the rituals required in their sacred natural sites, to reconnect with those sites and the energies of the forest. They emphasized the urgency of protecting these sites across our planet, which are like a network of acupuncture points, playing a vital role in maintaining her health and integrity. This opened up a whole new world to me – another dimension of the way in which matter and spirit interact. After decades of hard work, they have gained legal recognition for indigenous governance of an area of rainforest larger than the UK, rooted in their traditional spiritual leadership, and affirming the continuity of their ancestral path (Sánchez, 2018). This journey showed me that it is possible for Earth-centred cultures to revive and sustain their life ways, and inspire the transformation that is required of all humans now.

It was at this time, in the early 2000s, that I was fortunate to spend time with another important mentor, cultural historian Thomas Berry. He spoke and wrote with the knowing of an elder, announcing the inevitable demise of the industrial growth system and the vital need to shift from the dominant human-centred way of seeing, to an Earth-centred understanding of who we are. He called for a radical change in the industrial conception of law, to an Earth jurisprudence, recognizing the laws of the Earth as the 'Primary Text'

"Thomas Berry spoke and wrote with the knowing of an elder, announcing the inevitable demise of the industrial growth system and the vital need to shift from the dominant human-centred way of seeing, to an Earth-centred understanding of who we are."

(Berry, 1999; Bell, 2003; Cullinan, 2003). Indigenous peoples, Berry said, are an inspiration for this, as they consciously derive their customary laws from the laws of nature. This of course resonated with my own experience and added an important dimension in challenging all the institutions of the dominant growth economy, in order to transform them and restore a mutually enhancing relationship with our Earth Mother.

At this point, for various reasons my focus returned to Africa, and over the last two decades I have been involved in an ongoing exploration into ways of evoking Earth-centred consciousness through reviving Africa's indigenous knowledge and practices. Together with allies, we at the Gaia Foundation developed a series of experiential learning processes, including a three-year training for Earth jurisprudence practitioners. Learning from indigenous ways, core practices that we encourage include: strengthening our relationship with the wider Earth Community; strengthening our relationship with ancestors or the spiritual domain; going back to roots by learning from knowledgeable elders; and accompanying communities on a path of revival, inspired by the Colombian Amazonians, and connecting up to other social movements.

What gives me hope, despite the daily news of the continued displacement and destruction of the biosphere, and the speed of the "great unravelling" of life (Macy, 1998), is the joy and liberation that radiates from those who have remembered and reconnected to who we really are – Earthlings inextricably born of and sustained by the web of life. And what I have learnt so far is that this path of becoming ecocentric is a lifelong journey of becoming human. Just like a seed, we are born with all the potential, but the conditions in which the seed grows will influence its expression. ■

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Protecting our Earth

It all started with punching my art teacher. That's the day that defined my life. Of course it took me over 20 years to see the bigger picture – and to view it as a good thing. Back then, a child punching a teacher had no defence; the only route forward was removal to another school. At the time it felt as if what I had done was the worst thing in the world. Public disapproval was visceral.

So why did I do it? Because I cared – I cared about the fact that a boy one-third the size of the teacher was up against a wall and hadn't a fighting chance in hell of escaping the fury that was about to be unleashed. So I intervened. I punched the teacher.

You could say that was a critical choice point. My actions determined a very different fate and trajectory. Out of the rarefied environment of a Jesuit school run by control and fear, I discovered a very different pedagogy. One where violence did not exist; one where children were protected, seen and heard. The contrast could not have been greater.

It is said that critical choice points come maybe six or seven times in our lives. There have been a few for me so far, but this one – more than any other – brought great insights. One: a system that treats violence inflicted by adults upon children as normal is deeply unjust. Another: when violence is a norm, a disruptive force is often ejected rather than embraced. I had felt driven to intervene, to protect a small boy who was vulnerable in the face of an overwhelming violence. My headmaster, hearing only the version presented by the art teacher, removed me. In a way, what I experienced that day is an analogy, at the micro-level, of a global process. Let me explain.

The norm today is thus: that huge transnational corporations cause ecocide. This is a violence perpetrated against the Earth. However, such corporate ecocide is legal – more than that, it is state-sanctioned. Laws exist that confer upon business absolution from modern-day sins: a reckless disregard for making a killing – ecologically speaking. The criminal is not accepted to be the corporation that perpetrates serious harm against the biosphere; instead, it is the conscientious protector attempting to prevent ecological disaster who is the criminal. The state is complicit; business is given a free pass to continue.

I say this informedly. As a lawyer I have experienced both sides. As a junior barrister the world of criminal courts was my bread and butter. Mainly it was the stuff of everyday news, but ever so occasionally a case would come along where it was clear that an injustice had occurred. A mother in court because she did not take her child to school; an acquittal that really was not merited; a conviction due to lack of adequate representation. Civil law had its own raft of injustices: a client's insurance cover removed at appeal, leaving him vulnerable to losing everything; a company not caring about the employee who whistle-blew on an enormous malpractice, and caring only that there be no pay-out.

I entered into law because of the injustice I saw. I believed, and still do, in justice. The cycle playing out today at a global level is a cycle of injustice very similar to the one I saw play out at school. It goes like this: corporation causes harm, state permits it, and vulnerable community suffers. Anyone who dares to intervene in this cycle is treated as a criminal and removed.

There is one critical difference, however – the art teacher *intended* to cause harm to

Polly Higgins

About the author

Polly is a pioneering Scottish lawyer who has for the past 10 years advocated for Earth laws and who proposed to the United Nations that ecocide become a crime. You can read more about ecocide law at www.eradicatingecocide.com. You can sign up as an Earth Protector to the campaign to advance ecocide law at www.missionlifeforce.org.

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the small boy. For corporations, however, harm is secondary; the real driver of their actions is *profit*. The ecological damage, if acknowledged, is considered to be collateral, an externality. It is the law to put the interests of shareholders first, and all too often that means that profit-led industry is the norm. Some of the largest profits today come at the expense of our Earth by what are collectively known as the Carbon Majors – the global corporations causing the most significant destruction from excessive carbon emissions and dangerous industrial activity (Greenpeace, 2016). This is violence on an enormous scale.

And yet, we have no crime on our statute books to remedy such gross violation – an atrocity that has long-term, significant adverse impacts for the Earth. The checks and balances that are in place are woefully inadequate. Climate change driven by state-sanctioned industrial immunity is anthropogenic climate change; and the perpetrators are the ones turning a blind eye. This we know.

Which is why I seek to remedy this. I didn't know it then, but when I acted in defence of another child, it was the beginning of the end of a norm that could not last. Physical violence in schools was soon to be outlawed in Scotland – it took a court case brought by two mothers who cared. The law was changed and it became a crime to hit a child in school. Today, corporate harm of the Earth is the norm, but soon it too shall be a crime. ■

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Who has seen the wind?

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

'Who has seen the wind?'
by Christina Rossetti

Perhaps I've always been ecocentric – by default – from my formative years on a semi-subsistence dairy farm in southern Ontario before pesticides, crop insurance, veterinarians and monoculture crops. We sold milk and a little veal off farm, but were self-reliant in meat, milk, eggs, most vegetables, water, apples and firewood. When a heifer couldn't come into calf she went into the freezer. When the chickens were spent they ended up on the dinner table. We worried endlessly about the weather.

As children, we did school projects on tree types, swam in local ponds, fished in creeks, picked wild strawberries, skated on flooded fields, loved songbirds, shot crows, tortured frogs and ants, trapped and drowned roving tomcats, flew home-made kites, shot groundhogs, stayed well back from rabid foxes and raccoons, and knew well the smell of skunks.

In the 1960s, farm teenagers were indentured servants, costing parents almost nothing, working like adults but only for room and board. Most activities were labour intensive: cows were mucked out with forks; milk carried in buckets; square hay bales lifted by hand; sheaves of grain were stooked in fields then fed into threshing machines with pitchforks.

Mine was the last generation to live on the land, to be of the land, to know the land; we predated cash-cropping, combines, 1000-cow feedlots on 1000-acre farms. Our small fields were divided by hedgerows; our domestic animals ran with wild mammals; foxes raided our hen house; and many species of birds, amphibians and wild mammals raised their young in our pasture fields, along our fence lines, in our ephemeral wetlands, and in our woodlots. But by the end of the 1970s, rural depopulation had emptied the rambling farm houses of children. Mega-farms streamlined production and maximized productivity, putting all of nature into harness. Non-productive birds and animal were extirpated, large powerful machines eliminated woodlots, wetlands, fence lines and, along with it, the bulk of rural wild biodiversity.

If the lives of Canadian farm children of my generation were like those of authors WO Mitchell (*Who Has Seen the Wind*) and Wallace Stegner (*Wolf Willow*), this bucolic life all ended with the economic boom of the late 1960s. Ontario (and governments around the continent) borrowed heavily to build coal and nuclear power stations, freeways, universities and colleges to handle heavy immigration and the rural depopulation – which filled the new suburbs with citizens, who crammed the subways and freeways, rushing to careers in offices and factories. My six siblings and I all fled happily to the cities, barely giving our rural past a thought.

As ecocentric as my childhood was, I was also raised Catholic, and taught that the Earth was a disposable staging-ground for heaven; that my soul – not my earthly form or what nourished it – was where the action was. But though the priests and nuns explained that the Earth and all its miraculous biodiversity were of little consequence, it was too late. I was hooked

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on the planet, and though I loved city life, for the next blissful decade I cycled in the countryside, and fell in love with canoeing and hiking, and had the euphoric feeling that all was well with the biosphere.

However, in the 1980s my illusions were shattered by my growing awareness of the Cold War and the ecological crisis and their litany of woes – the destruction of the ozone layer, the threat of nuclear war, pesticides, smog-induced asthma, nuclear power, militarization, the war on drugs, the cancer epidemic *etc.* – and as a result of either my strong Catholic sense of right and wrong, my love of my province and country, or just plain common sense, I joined the ranks of peace, social justice, green activists.

"In the 1980s my illusions were shattered by my growing awareness of the Cold War and the ecological crisis and their litany of woes."

I loved being part of that nascent green movement. I felt community; I've never been a lonely ecologist. In the early 1990s I wrote:

> Although writers like Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold had long written on the importance of living in balance with nature, the modern green movement started in Canada and around the world with the hippies in the 1960s. The hippy phenomenon, however, ended quickly because it had no structure or economic base, but the movement's life-affirming values didn't disappear as much as they went underground, and re-emerged in the 70s as isolated, small-scale enterprises and organizations such as health food stores, women's and environmental groups, renewable energy stores, organic farms. Though disparate, these groups gave the green movement structure and an economic life, and became integral to communities. The counterculture movement was the first mass rejection of consumer culture, and its rallying cries for peace, love and flower power eventually evolved into the Green Party values of non-violence, social justice and ecological thinking.

Dissatisfied with pressure groups, I threw myself into Green politics – excited and proud to be part of what I hoped was an international political movement that would challenge and replace traditional political parties and usher in a new ecozoic era. I served as the leader of the Ontario Green Party for 17 years, leading the party through four elections and culminating in achieving 8% of the vote in 2007. Building the Green political alternative was the work of the angels.

I felt energized and powerful building and leading the local Green Party; I held fierce pride. But the process of electing actual Green politicians was painfully slow. Even in countries where they are significant, like Germany, positive change hasn't anywhere near kept up with negative developments. After two decades in Green politics, while it was heartening that so many people and governments were now thinking and talking along the lines of sustainability and conservation, the on-the-ground transition, by any yardstick, was happening excruciatingly slowly. There had to be a better approach.

Perhaps the problem was in our economic system rather than in human nature or politics. People and governments honestly wanted to go green, but the economic system rewarded the opposite. Government regulations prescribed sustainability but any effort was usually undermined by the tax and subsidy system, and all the while more nature was sacrificed.

In 2005, after much research, I joined an obscure economics think-tank that promotes the work of the 19th century US economist Henry George. His core idea was that governments should be financed by collecting economic rent instead of by taxing incomes, business and consumption. Economic rent refers to revenue without a corresponding cost of production, the societal surplus that flows to monopoly-held assets like land, resources (oil, trees, water), the privilege to pollute, billboards, the stock market, the electromagnetic spectrum, agricultural quotas, taxi medallions *etc.* Though this wealth rightfully belongs to the community, at present it mostly flows untaxed to private asset owners, forcing governments to finance themselves by damaging the economy by taxing incomes and sales.

My thinking was that this economic programme would right-price nature, reward innovation and thus reverse the despoliation of the commons, the Earth. But even though this economic approach has the potential simultaneously to address productivity, wealth disparity and the ecological imperative, and was supported by classical economists (including Adam Smith, David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill), prominent people (like Winston Churchill, Sun Yet-Sen and Mark Twain) and modern economic thinkers (including Joseph Stiglitz, Milton Friedman, Michael Hudson, Herman Daly and George Monbiot), it is still almost unknown and unlikely to be implemented in time to stave off the collapse of the biosphere.

Why are there so abysmally few ecological citizens? Why are we collectively oblivious to the fact that we depend on a healthy biosphere for our existence? The vast majority of people abdicate their responsibility to authorities who are elected and appointed to be forward-thinking guardians – but ensuring their own re-election requires that such guardians pander to endless consumer demands, sacrificing more of the Earth at every turn. So perhaps the problem is political after all.

I now hold only a faint hope that humans will one day learn to live in balance with nature. It's probably too late to turn the juggernaut of present-day attitudes around; it appears doubtful humans will last out the 21st century. I'm now psychologically prepared for the collapse of the biosphere within my lifetime. I know my view is shared with many, and I, like most of them, will continue the struggle only because I have no choice. ■

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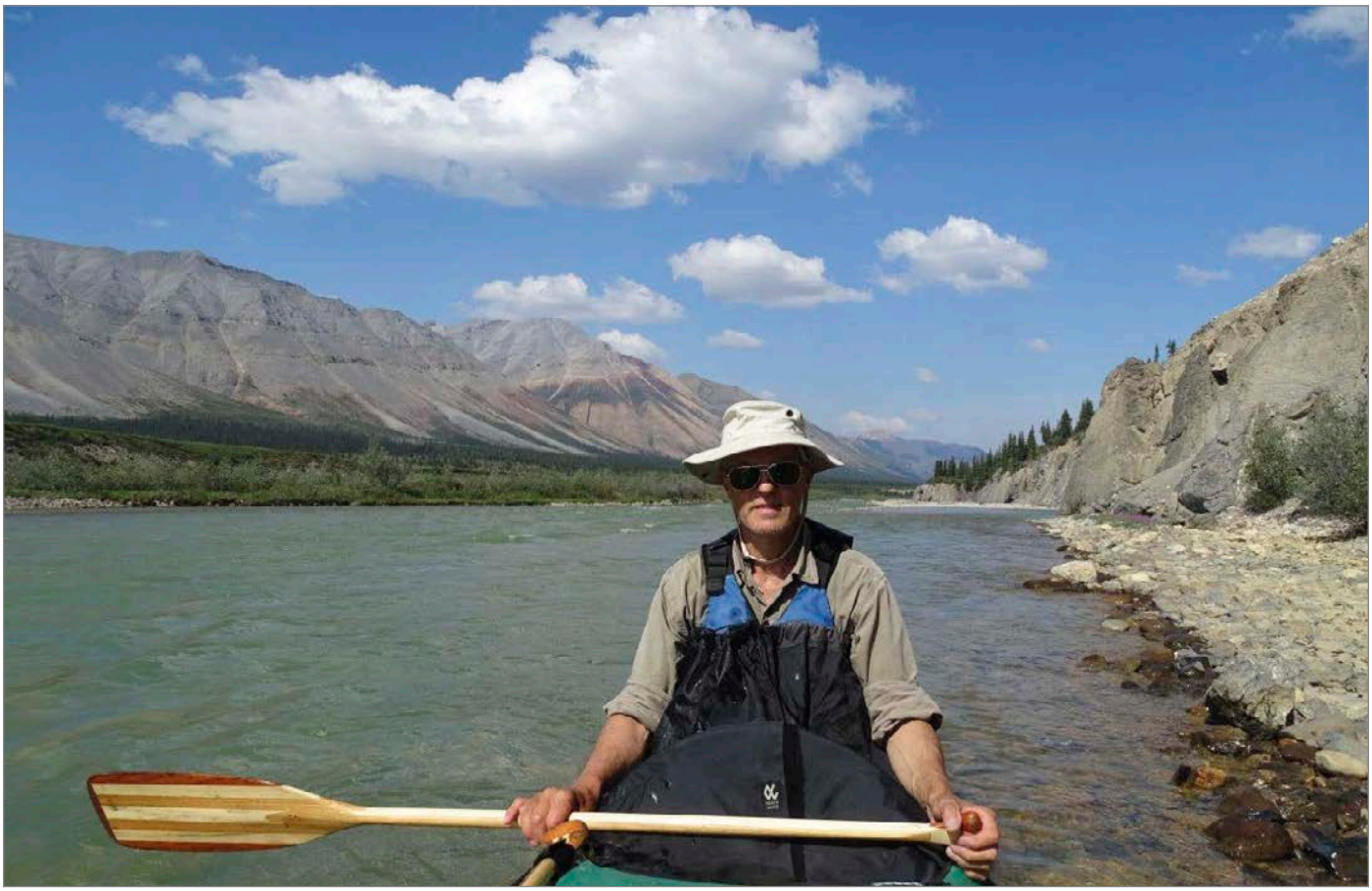

Ecocentrism: My road less travelled

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I first saw my way clear to writing this essay in a conversation with Ian Whyte around a campfire in Algonquin Park, Ontario. (Discussions closer to home with Joe Gray also helped.) Equally, however, it seems appropriate that I should be starting it in a café in Paris, France. Let me explain.

My path to ecocentrism differs markedly from most others I know. For one thing, I like being 'in nature' but am not much of an outdoorsman. Nor have I been inspired by natural science. I am, in fact, incorrigibly urban, and I have found my way through the humanities, arts – painting, music, fiction and poetry – and non-naturalistic philosophy, especially metaphysics. In that sense my path is an eccentric one, but, for that very reason, it may be interesting or amusing, and perhaps helpful to others out there who are more like me. Needless to say, I didn't plan it this way. It developed, as these things do, in organic ways that are only clear in hindsight.

I was born in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1951, and lived there till I was fifteen. The year of my birth, my father and grandfather (on my mother's side) purchased 4000 hectares on Lake Manitoba, which they turned into a wild goose sanctuary. Sir Peter Scott, a friend of my grandfather's, was also involved. So I grew up familiar with wetlands, waterfowl and the avian inhabitants of the boreal forest and suburban gardens, as well as the great brooding presence of the North, which is never far away. I'm still very fond of those birds. I did a little duck-shooting, as you do there, but slaughtering wild animals never really appealed. (Nowadays, I'd arm 'em if I could.)

I was also taken off for months at a time by my mother, a great traveller, to East Africa, where I got to know the spectacular fauna there. On a couple of safaris, we were accompanied by the great ornithologist John G Williams. John was old school: the rarer the bird, the more important it was to shoot, skin and stuff it. That's how an obscure subspecies of Ugandan cormorant ended up being named after me: *Phalacrocorax carbo patricki*.

However, I was a timid and bookish child, happier reading Ernest Thompson Seaton, Charles GD Roberts and Arthur Ransome than roughing it in the wild, and human nature being nothing if not perverse, the effect of my upbringing in this context was substantially negative. I experienced where I lived – especially given its unforgiving climate, dominated by apparently endless winter – as harsh and oppressive, and, culturally speaking, hopelessly provincial; indeed, literally so. (This was unfair, to some extent, but emotions often are.) And, although its birds were incredible, wild Africa itself was raw, overwhelming and often frankly terrifying.

When, therefore, I removed to a small liberal arts boarding school in a bucolic part of upstate New York, I found it idyllic. Here was a nature – temperate, intricate and graced with gentle hills, tall trees and swimmable fresh water – that wasn't supremely indifferent at best, let alone trying to kill me. It was actually friendly! Fatefully, at exactly the same time I read *The Lord of the Rings*, falling into it in the way one falls in love: helplessly, and utterly enchanted. What happened then, I now see, was that the natural world of upstate New York and New England merged with that of Middle-earth – which, as anyone who has read the book

knows, is extraordinarily vivid, varied and alive. In short, nature became literary, a kind of great non-anthropocentric art, while literature became a natural world.

By the way, *The Lord of the Rings* is not a philosophical treatise, and the relationships with nature therein are not always consistent. But the forests and rivers and mountains of Middle-earth are always fully distinct, independent, sentient characters in their own right; none are generic. And although you will find a Christian stewardship ethics ("Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved," says Tolkien in a letter [1981]), there are also instances of ecocentrism. Frodo experiences the intrinsic value of a tree – "He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself" (Tolkien, 1966: book 2, chapter 6) – and Goldberry rebukes Frodo for asking whether Tom Bombadil owns the Old Forest: "No indeed! ... The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land each belong to themselves" (book 1, chapter 7).

Eventually, my search for somewhere I felt truly at home took me to the British Isles, where my continuing flight from the Canadian mid-West ensconced me in London. I have remained there more-or-less since. I get by in a series of forays, from parks and the Thames (weekly), to Burnham Beeches and the Ashdown Forest (occasionally) and semi-wild Ireland (two or three times a year).

Before settling down, however, I spent some time at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where I was lucky enough to study under Gregory Bateson during his last year there. As much mentor and model as formal teacher, he was a big influence, and although he didn't contextualize it so, his work was precisely about how to think and, since they cannot ultimately be separated, live ecologically.

Bateson insisted that there are two modern superstitions (his word): *supernaturalism* and *mechanism*. Equally mistaken and damaging, they also covertly conspire. What would Dawkins *et alii* and the religious fundamentalists do without each other? Plus, each caste is conveniently left in charge of its side of things. In contrast, Bateson taught that life as it is lived, including not only the natural world but also the mind of the human animal, is both wholly material and wholly mental. It comprises the sum of its ongoing relationships, and these, again, are at once embodied and intangible. (Where exactly is a relationship located?) Hence the titles of his two main books: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) and *Mind and Nature: A necessary unity* (1979).

Bateson called this way of apprehending the world 'systems theory' (as opposed to theories that prioritize *things*) but, for me, it has come to fuller life as ecocentrism. It runs against a profoundly entrenched tendency in Western metaphysics, as it informs our societies and cultures, to divide everything into a series of exclusive, value-laden binaries: mental/spiritual versus physical/material, natural versus cultural, masculine versus feminine, and so on. These are not only anti-ecological – indeed, ecocidal – but also profoundly disenchanting. Such divisions destroy the wonder of life, which is, as Max Weber says, "concrete magic" (Weber, 1991: 282). Only thus is life's intrinsic value revealed, helping us to realize that and resist it being carved up, commodified and sold off.

Back in England, I became involved with a tiny group called the Campaign for Political Ecology (where I met Sandy Irvine), then Left Bio (run by the late David Orton but of which Ian Whyte was a stalwart member, as was Victor Postnikov, now our poetry editor). I also got to know others, in addition to those already mentioned, whose work further shaped my thinking in ecocentric ways. They include David Abram, Graham Harvey, Val Plumwood, Sean Kane, Stan Rowe, Ariel Salleh, Ruth Thomas-Pellicer, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Wendy Wheeler. It's worth noting that these exemplars, teachers and friends, like the others mentioned here, were never only intellectual. They were and are equally moral. Maybe these two aspects cannot,

"The forests and rivers and mountains of Middle-earth are always fully distinct, independent, sentient characters in their own right; none are generic."

> "The sign and seal of a living natural world, including ourselves as one of its plain citizens, is wonder."

or should not, be separated; ultimately, it's about integrity. That's what they communicate, and what we most need to learn.

With Rowe, together with his colleague Ted Mosquin, the term as well as idea of ecocentrism finally came front-and-centre. I had already absorbed quite a lot of Deep Ecology by then, but parts of it left me unhappy. A single ecological 'Big Self' is not only impossible – there are no selves without others – it's solipsistic, whereas ecology is precisely about relationships (plural), while the corresponding call for 'unity' tries to ignore or flatten out differences, which are important as well as unavoidable. We want a world where difference is respected, even appreciated. Ecocentrism shed this unhelpful baggage. (To be fair, though, Richard Sylvan had already done so in his unjustly neglected co-authored book, *The Greening of Ethics* [Sylvan and Bennett, 1994].)

Here's a curious little affiliation: as a boy, I spent time with the redoubtable Al Hochbaum, director of research at Delta Waterfowl Station, down the road from my grandfather's goose sanctuary on Lake Manitoba. Many years later, I found he had been the student of Aldo Leopold who had insisted Leopold should write down his ideas in what became 'Thinking Like a Mountain' (Leopold, 1949). Hochbaum was eventually pushed out of Delta by the managers and money-men... Heigh-ho.

Out of my own interest and concern, I proposed a book on ecological (not 'environmental') ethics, and they accepted. Written with invaluable feedback from Stan Rowe, David Orton and Val Plumwood, it was published in 2006. (I found that when academics at conferences found I wasn't writing for professional reasons they tended to edge away from me, as if it might be catching.) When Polity asked me for a second edition, I took a year to make it bigger and better, and the result appeared in 2011. Meanwhile, the Ecocentric Alliance was born, partly from what remained of Left Bio but with some fresh blood. Then I encountered Joe Gray through the charity Population Matters, of which we were both members; a chance meeting, as we say in Middle-earth. After wider discussions about a successor to the late *Wild Earth* journal, Joe and I met in a pub near the Barbican in London, and over some organic lager we hatched *The Ecological Citizen*. The first thing we did was to involve Ian Whyte in Ottawa (who is likewise ecocentric to his bones). The Journal in turn has introduced me to many fine ecocentrics who were new to me, some of whom are now my fellow-editors.

I continue to find support and shape for ecocentrism in poems from the heart, the non-anthropocentric humanism of Montaigne, ecofeminism, philosophical Daoism, animism, civic (and potentially eco-) republicanism, myth, biosemiotics, Mahayana Buddhism and indigenous ecological wisdom. Is such eclecticism scandalous? Maybe a better question, in an era of globalization, would be: is it avoidable? In any case, these are all projects which are either non-modern, or working within but against modernity and its ecocidal programme of disenchantment in the name of total mastery.

Contrariwise, the sign and seal of a living natural world, including ourselves as one of its plain citizens, is wonder. That is what tells us to pay attention, because we are in the presence of what makes life worth living. As William Blake says, "Life delights in life" (Blake, 1908). This is decidedly not a matter of psychology or what is called subjectivity. Wild wonder reveals both truth and value, and without personal experience of that, all the political, economic and scientific programmes in the world, important though they are, will fail.

My own work these days is mainly trying to understand (not 'explain') and describe enchantment. What are its dynamics, conditions and effects? How can we make a place for it in our lives, both individual and collective? How can we honour and encourage it? Maybe this is quixotic, even hopeless. Ultimately, though, what is

worth doing these days that isn't? What we most need is not hope but a stubborn sense of wonder together with courage – plain courage in a tight place. In our shared quest for an ecocentric world, I take much from the company, for which I give deep thanks. ■

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'Green Pietà'
Patrick Curry

> "In our shared quest for an ecocentric world, I take much from the company, for which I give deep thanks."