

## Debate

More and more practitioners are becoming aware of ecopsychology, the study of human beings' psychological relationship with the ecosystems of which we are part, and ecotherapy, the application of these ideas to therapeutic practice; in fact *Therapy Today* has run several articles on these themes.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Until quite recently, though, there hasn't been much close thinking about the relationship between ecological ways of thinking and feeling on the one hand

and therapy on the other. The tendency has been to bolt therapeutic ideas onto ecopsychology, or ecopsychological ideas onto therapy, without really bringing the two together into a new whole. Such a fusion is one purpose of my new book, *Wild Therapy* published by PCCS Books.

In writing the book, I realised that in order for therapy to think and feel ecologically, it has to change some of its core attitudes. But paradoxically, I also found that the elements of an ecological

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To avoid environmental catastrophe, the world needs a fundamental shift of consciousness and behaviour. *Nick Totton* asks how therapy can contribute to changing our relationship with the ecosystem of which we are part.

*Illustration by A Richard Allen*

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# Wild therapy





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therapy were already present in the field, often without being perceived as such. What I therefore try to do in the book is to identify these implicit elements and assemble them in a coherent way, so as to describe a way of doing therapy which is new, but also always already present – an ecosystemic therapy which recognises that humans don’t stand alone in the universe, but are profoundly connected with and dependent on other species and entities with whom we share this earth; and which recognises also that skilful living stems from a capacity for spontaneity and yielding to what is, rather than from a struggle to exert control over self and others.

The emphasis on spontaneity is as much part of ecological awareness as the emphasis on connectedness. Both ideas follow from systems theory, which sees the world as a set of complex, self-organising, adaptive systems, where nothing *causes* anything else in a linear sense, but everything mutually *responds* to everything else, in a way which corresponds closely to the Buddhist concept of *paticca samuppada*, ‘dependent co-arising’.<sup>4,5</sup> Hence trying to isolate oneself from the world and exercise control over it is ultimately self-defeating – as we are seeing with the current ecological crisis.

Therapy has generally stood against the dominant cultural message to ‘be in control of yourself and your environment’: it has tried to help people tolerate the anxiety of not being in control – of our feelings, our thoughts, our body, our future. There has always been a struggle over this issue, however: new forms of therapy constantly arise which claim ‘You can be in control after all’. And currently the dominant social structure is saying that therapy itself must be controlled, brought within the field of surveillance, monitoring, regulation, safety. As the world becomes increasingly frightening, it becomes increasingly necessary to pretend that security can be achieved, through ever-greater monitoring, surveillance and censorship – and this process in turn ratchets up our fear and insecurity. This is the path our society seems to be taking; but equally, of course, it is an internal psychological process, embodying exactly the anxieties which therapy arose to address.

#### Why wild therapy?

So why *Wild Therapy*? For me this is a powerful way of pointing to the ever-present tension in human culture between the wild and the domesticated.

In the move from hunter-gatherer society to agriculture, human beings tried to gain control over the world, over each other, and over the other-than-human and more-than-human. In doing this we split ourselves off from the world – it became, in fact, our ‘environment’, rather than the whole of which we are an integral part. In Ursula LeGuin’s resonant phrase, we learnt to live ‘outside the world’.<sup>6</sup> By trying to control the world, we have made it *other*, and therefore dangerous and frightening. The more we seek control, the closer we seem to get to it, the further our goal recedes. As the *Tao te Ching* tells us, the more we try to control things the further out of balance we push them: ‘Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it? I do not believe it can be done.

The world is ruled by letting things take their course.

It cannot be ruled by interfering.’<sup>7</sup>

Therapy is by nature wild; but a lot of it at the moment is rather tame. The book is intended to help shift the balance back towards wildness, by showing how therapy can connect with ecological thinking, and hence with the mutual co-creation of all beings. When we think ecosystemically, we see each species, each being, each person, not as an isolated monad, a sort of old-fashioned billiard ball atom interacting with other billiard balls by knocking into them – but as inherently and profoundly linked with every other species, being, person. We develop a sense of the endless complexity of existence; and realise that wildness, a state where things are allowed to happen of their own accord, is far more deeply complex than domesticated civilisation, just as a jungle – or even a piece of wasteland – is more complex than a garden.

Although the path of control is becoming increasingly emphasised in society, it has been with us since the Neolithic development of domestication. This was not just about humans domesticating other species; we also and above all domesticated *ourselves*. Hence the subtitle of this book, ‘Undomesticating Inner and Outer Worlds’. How far can we reasonably hope to go in moving away from domestication, given that the sustainable forager population of the earth in the Palaeolithic era was perhaps around one person per square mile?

In a literal sense, we clearly cannot go very far at all. A reduction of humanity to Palaeolithic population levels – which a few people are desperate enough to

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hope for – will only happen through catastrophe; and only in this way could surviving humans live wild in the literal sense. In *Wild Therapy* I explore the possibility of developing a wildness which is less literal, but perhaps none the less real and important: a reconnection with what I describe as ‘Wild Mind’, which is necessarily at the same time a reconnection with the world and with the other beings which inhabit it – and this will involve living, as well as thinking and feeling, in very different ways. Wild Mind refers to a state of awareness in which humans will not want, or be prepared, to damage the world for our own short-term comfort and convenience.

### **Wild mind**

*Wild Therapy* offers a context for all this through connecting the attitudes of forager cultures with contemporary Western understandings of consciousness, so as to delineate a mode of being present in *all* cultures, which I call Wild Mind; it suggests how this can be expressed through a ‘wild therapy’, not newly invented, but bringing together a wide range of already existing ideas and practices. Some features I propose for wild therapy are:

- It recognises the interdependence of everything that exists
- It is through-and-through relational
- It identifies the role of the other-than-human and more-than-human in the therapeutic process
- It supports, protects and defends liminality
- It celebrates embodiment as a central aspect of our existence
- It welcomes the spontaneous and the unknown, trusting what arises of its own accord
- It seeks to transform fear-based defensive practice into undefensive, contact-based, adventurous practice.

As I have already emphasised, all of these features are present in the therapy field already; but I think it makes an important difference to identify and connect them in this way, and to show how they involve an ecological way of understanding.

So *Wild Therapy* looks in one direction towards therapeutic practice; and in another direction towards the ‘deep background’ of human nature and human history. It also looks in a third direction, and asks how therapy can contribute to changing our relationship with the ecosystem of which we are part. To avoid environmental catastrophe, the world needs a change of heart, a fundamental

shift of consciousness and behaviour which is perhaps only slightly less hard to imagine than a return to hunter-gatherer lifestyle. However, it is necessary; without it, a literal return to hunter-gatherer life (and population levels) may be the *best* we can hope for. I believe psychotherapy and counselling have an important role to play in supporting and facilitating Wild Mind, or ecological consciousness. Changes of heart are what therapy specialises in; and ever since it began, therapy has been trying to help the world change its heart, by offering it collective as well as individual therapy. The only problem, as Andrew Samuels points out, is that like many individual clients who at first seem enthusiastic, ‘the world has not shown up for its first session. The world is ambivalent about its therapy, suspicious of its political therapists, reluctant to be a patient’.<sup>8</sup>

This isn’t hard to explain. Most people are deeply traumatised, acutely or sub-critically, personally and/or by inheritance, and live in a society which as a whole is also traumatised; trauma gives rise to dissociation and denial. I trace this trauma to its origins, mythical or otherwise, in what I call the Neolithic bargain, when we exchanged the freedom and wellbeing of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle for the combination of protection from other humans and increasingly damaged attachment which goes along with urban existence in patriarchal societies. The structures of domination which this created now reach very deeply into our psyches and bodies; in viral fashion, they seek to take over and control every new social formation that arises. As we are currently experiencing, they make it enormously hard for us to free our attention to deal with the environmental crises we face. In advanced capitalist culture, nearly all of us are on the edge of being unable to cope, unable to do what we have to do and process what we have to process while also handling our internal emotional states. And a further level of this is *cultural* overwhelm, the result of many generations of damage through war, famine, disease, and abuse. We are all deeply distressed and struggling to cope; and we bring this distress to environmental issues just as we do to everything else.

Individuals seek to protect a fragile bubble of personal reality which makes their life bearable. Some key elements of this are fun, freedom, status-based identity, and, most fundamentally, relaxation. People who talk about

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environmental catastrophe appear to threaten all of these elements, which in many of their most common forms – consumption, travel, entertainment – require high carbon consumption. And most crucially, such information seems to threaten *relaxation*: the human need for downtime, empty mental space, periods when we are not anxious and planning for survival. Even if we can only get relaxation through getting drunk and watching TV, it is still deeply precious, and we will protect it at all costs. Hence for large numbers of people it is not climate change itself which appears as a danger, but rather news of climate change, which might break into their fragile bubble of emotional survival.

Until people are willing and able to tolerate the feelings which information about environmental crisis sets off in them – feelings like fear, grief, rage, despair – it will be very difficult for them to absorb that information, and therefore to act on it. The first thing to do when faced with overwhelm in a therapeutic situation is to point out to the person that this is what is going on: 'It's all a bit much, isn't it?' 'It's hard for you to take things in just now.' Just on its own, this helps people contact reality and find some solid ground. Then we need to build a sense of safety which will allow them to access their embodied emotions.

### Collective overwhelm

This approach could be carried over to collective overwhelm around climate change and other environmental disasters. If people feel threatened by the *news* of danger, then redoubling our efforts to spread the news will actually be counterproductive. As 'therapists to the world', we need to find ways of helping people become aware that they are in overwhelm, under the bedclothes with their fingers in their ears. We also need a parallel strategy of helping people reconnect with their innate love and awe for the other-than-human and more-than-human, so that they start to feel revulsion against their mistreatment.

These strategies are supportive rather than aggressive; in tune with the human capacity for Wild Mind, rather than driving it underground. However, they are hard to apply in a situation which screams '*emergency*' as soon as we let it into our consciousness.

And, of course, change is not only a matter of individual or even collective consciousness. There are huge structures of power and money which necessarily oppose the wilding of the world, because any such process will destroy

them. We may despise political leaders for their inaction around climate change, but few of them are fools: they know that capitalism can only survive through constant expansion, and that the consequences if capitalism abruptly fails would be disastrous – for humans at least – on a level similar to the consequences of climate change.

I believe that *Wild Therapy* has a role to play in the doubtful and difficult work of creating a new culture which can live well on the earth without damaging ourselves and other beings. There are many enormous obstacles to this work, and it isn't easy to see how it can succeed; it will involve remaking our economic system, and abandoning structures of domination and hierarchy which have been in place for millennia.

Fortunately, though, *things will happen of their own accord*, as newly emergent features of the complex web of being, not following any intention or plan. If a new culture is going to come into existence, then it must be already brewing, already cooking in many thousands of places around the planet; slowly assembling itself out of millions of local acts of creativity and resistance. This may not be enough; but we can relax in the knowledge that it will be as good as it is possible for it to be. If we can accept this, it comforts us, stops us wasting our time trying to control the future, and at the same time shows us our path, which is to *envision* and live the future we desire. ■

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### Special offer

Therapy Today readers can buy the book *Wild Therapy* by Nick Totton for £15 with free P&P (RRP £16.99) by calling 01989 763900 or visiting [www.pccs-books.co.uk](http://www.pccs-books.co.uk) and quoting code WT0311. Offer ends 30 April 2011.

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