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Explorations in Climate Psychology Journal

Issue 2: April 2022

Decentring the human

FACING DIFFICULT TRUTHS

Climate Psychology Alliance

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Cover photo by Toby Chown: 'The centre cannot hold'

Decentring the human

By the Editorial Team

In the first edition of *Explorations*, the Editorial Team asked the question: "What is climate psychology?" We found multiple and rich answers, working through critical psychology to cli-fi, from personal narrative to non-dualism, and much in between.

For Issue 2, we wanted to consider what psychologies that did not assume humans to be at their centre would look and feel like. To lead us in, **Halina Pytlaskinska** writes lyrically of the Earth's dreaming, molten heart, before taking us into a deep dive into the being of a whale. It is a sensuous, encompassing vision. Her piece finishes with this suggestion: "Each unique organism is invited to cherish inter-being and sustain life on Earth. Each can live in sync with or fight Earth's wondrous pounding heart."

The issue of decentring the human in psychology opens up complex issues. One of these is the spectre of misanthropy, a genuine risk for those involved in the climate and ecological crisis who bear witness to the destruction human beings have wrought on the living earth. A theme that emerges throughout this issue's articles is the possibility of psychologies related to place, animals and systems that offer new patterns of human engagement.

From **Dr Anne Poelina**, academic and Australian Indigenous elder, we hear a glimpse of a psychology that places dream and ceremony at its centre. She sharply observes the contrast between her take on XR messaging of the world being better off without humans, with the Indigenous understanding that the Earth would be lonely without human communities, care and ceremonies. Poelina's message to the majority world about how to relate to Indigenous people is also clear: "Stop othering us!" She suggests that the key to co-creating a de-anthropocentric psychology is cultivating a relationship with place; a process that is available to anyone.

This theme returns in our **group discussion**, along with themes of language and between-ness, and questions of who, or what kind of thinking, needs decentring. Again, the theme of a relationship to place emerges: how gardening changes when you notice what the plants want to do and what else lives there, and how returning to a place each day becomes a conversation rather than a visit. A practice of place opens a doorway to a world that humans are embedded within rather than dominate.

Kevin Hall goes further into this world – 'the zone' – as he reports on his research into what makes for good communication with animals or plants. How the intricacies of somatic engagement with the hooves of horses, or the consciousness of the breath, or the lunge of a snake can create an entry into the zone of animal communication. Hall describes how dreams and the imaginal can lend a hand, along with a kind of basic manners that allows the walls that separate humans from non-humans to dissolve. The most important of these manners, he finds, is a steadfast recognition by humans of the reality of the other-than-human.

Harriet Sams focuses on the good manners of entertaining the voice of the other-than-human to speak through her encounters, showing us how the three ecotherapy spirals of healing, connection and service can guide us further into a world that's alive with more-than-human concerns.

The Editorial Team wanted to offer writings that ground theory in practice, critical thinking and personal experience. How do the encounters that we may have in 'the zone' come into mainstream areas or systems, into organisations or government departments? **Rembrandt Zegers** takes us on his personal journey into thinking systemically – starting with his experience of working in the closed-vision silos of government departments, through to developing an understanding of the world and himself as living systems. He writes: "Our culture works against an awareness of the unconscious, through its promotion of hierarchy and obedience to authority. It also forces task orientation and efficiency, as part of our economic thinking of progress." What triggers the disruption of this linearity is an encounter with the other-than-human; in this case, a bird.

In his piece about the practice of decentring the human, **Chris Robertson** follows a similar line of thought towards a recognition that confusion and helplessness may be places that allow the heart to feel, to dismember and break through what has sealed us in. Chris asks the question: "How much can we bear to be with what seems unbearable?" One answer comes in a dream image, where personal wounds are not healed but joined by salt tears joining with the tide.

Jenni Silverstein closes our issue by guiding us towards a ritual of connection to a tree, grounding us with it, and reminding us that emotions too can be composted.

Decentring the human takes many forms, yet all of our writers find a different kind of meeting at the edges of the human. It is a meeting that both enriches the human, but that crucially allows humans to enrich what they meet, through a kind of reciprocity. Again and again, the language of dream and body comes into our writers' minds; be it eye contact with a bird, or awareness of the hunger of a heron, or of the opportunities within ceremony. Writing, too, can be a kind of ceremony; the engagement with images and voices taking place in a place that can be more than human. Included here are poems by **Dr Joanna Gilar** and **Rachel Cakebread** that take the reader from the human centric into the deep uncertainties of the Anthropocene, where birds fly "uncaptioned/across the skimming sky". Perhaps reading, too, can be an act of liberating the human from a narrow self-destructive centre towards the place where we find both what feels unbearable and what renews our kinship with the more-than-human.

Earth's dreaming heart

By Halina Pytlaskinska

Deep in the Earth lies a core, 6,000 degrees Celsius, as hot as the sun.[1] A dense tumult of crystalline iron and nickel, enriched with elements of silver and gold. This dynamic globe turns 4,000 miles beneath the ground where beasts creep, fly or swim. Never exposed to daylight, no creature sees this iron heart that fuels animal hearts of flesh. A human heart is a mere handful, Earth's is vast.

Enveloping this solid organ, a molten river churns, over 1,400 miles wide. Turbulent waves force Earth's core to spin. As elements of uranium and thorium decay, surges of radioactivity ignite to keep the furnace temperatures brewing. Gush and gulp of fiery liquid creates electric currents. Streaming particles writhe together to manifest a magnetic field of play.

For 4.5 billion years, this ancient heart has rotated in the dark, patiently weaving and gathering the world to it. A heart that has borne witness to trillions of life stories.

Surrounding the hot core and molten river is Earth's majestic mantle. Almost 3,000 kilometres thick; a surging layer of magnesium, iron and silicon. A soup, dense as caramel candy.

On top of the mantle sits Earth's crust, cool and brittle like the shell of an egg. Great slabs of mineral rock move in slow motion to fashion a giant shifting jigsaw. Silica, aluminium, iron and magnesium adjust infinitesimally. The drama of volcanoes and earthquakes is born from this commotion.

Earth's nature is fierce. Intense pressure of love builds into a maelstrom of passion that bursts into the light of day. Tectonic plates collide. Feral pressure explodes into folded mountain ranges, plains and ocean beds, to nurse the myriad of species, born from the beating heart. The roar and moan of the great iron ball, as it whirls against the crash of the molten waves, would deafen any surface creature. The force would pummel bones and explode flesh apart.

Every surface sound is as unique as each drumbeat of Earth's ellipsoid heart. Many species weave their own language or improvise a transient vernacular between them.

Inquisitive life forms explore one another through touch. The tip of a green fern brushes against granite rock. Tree branches sway in the wind. An elm creaks and bows to the storm. Twigs finger the gusting air. Mature leaves slip from sprigs that embraced them. They furl to the ground to become rustling, rotating piles of russet gold. New colours carpet the autumnal woodlands with seasonal flair. A sparrow alights on the branch of a tree. He plumps his chest and bursts into song. A chaffinch joins in, improvising through the gaps in the sparrow's melody.

Sensual streams stroke a muddy bank. A hollow is carved to house a vole. Mud caresses the vole's soft fur in a loving gesture. The warm-blooded creature slips into the cool river where waters hug her body as she swims.

1. https://www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2016/01/16/layers-of-the-earth-lies-beneath-earths-crust/?sh=4f4faea4441d

Photo by Toby Chown: 'Furnace'

Earth's core pumps the communal heartbeat. Life dances to this rhythm and rests in the gaps between the pulses. Free-flowing love pours between every surface. The unique is celebrated. When diverse beings touch, a tension is created in which intimacy can blossom.

As a child, in my bed before I slept, I had visceral memories of existing in other lifeforms.

Drifting in the liminal space between wakefulness and dreams, I sense the body of a whale around me, a colossal heave of flesh. Lyrical and wild, roaming the deep in elegant arcs. My sea-faring bulk of blubber cruises the salty depths. Unique patina, etched on my coarse hide, shines blue beneath the waves. Rising to greet the sun, this barnacled coat turns a motley grey.

I thrive on a rich cuisine of krill; around four tons a day. Plunging the brine, I gulp mouthfuls of foam. My tongue, heavy as an elephant, pushes against my baleen bristles on my upper jaw. Seawater gushes out to leave the precious krill in my mouth. For a century, my kind was hunted near to extinction for our bristles. Our magnificent bodies hacked to pieces. Baleen fashioned into corsets, parasols and hats.

I am the loudest creature on the planet. Louder than a jet engine. My low whistle and moan travels hundreds of miles through the

waters, helping me to navigate under the sea. Melancholy ballads echo through vaults and deep caverns. A sonorous madrigal outlines the sharp ledges and ridges of ocean beds, veiled in perpetual darkness.

Across the leagues, I call my sisters to me. Sensing the child moving within the waters of my body, I cruise to the drum of the universal heartbeat. Exhilarated, I see my kin, and gather speed to join my pod. We socialise for a few days, share our truths through combined symphony. Resonant and echoing tonal chant. Their voices urge me forward, faster and faster, giddy, bursting with joy; I rise and throw my body out of the water. Watching our play, Earth smiles. As I leap, the child in my womb hiccups with glee. I crash back into the brine, smacking the surface with my side. Waves crest and fall around us. My sisters circle me. Two or three burst the ocean's skin. Their falling bodies smash the cold silence. We play together for a day or two, then leave to enjoy our solitude.

My heart weighs 400 pounds. The pulse can be detected two miles away.[2] Small, compared to the Earth's heart, but greater than the heart of any land animal. In my DNA I carry a library of memories from Earth's history. Proud to be her record keeper,[3] I have swum these oceans for millennia. Joyful to be Earth's child, held gently within the waters of her womb, as she arches through the cosmos. I feel her turning on her axis, wheeling her path through the galaxy. She swims through space and time. I slice through the seas. Journeying together, she and I are one.

By day, I see the horizon between azure heavens and the aquamarine, but at night the ocean and sky meld. Bioluminescent plankton are lit like stardust spilling into the sea. I fly towards polar waters for the summer months, manoeuvring between planets of iceberg that shimmer milky white in the moonlight. Dazzled by the constellations, my chest heaves and releases a romantic shanty to Jupiter. The same wild melody that my mother sang to me. Our voices joining across the generations.

Earth's deep biomass could weigh as much as all living things on the surface.[4] This gargantuan dark heart holds all in safekeeping. The magnetic field, fired from deep within Earth's core, keeps the temperature stable to support life. In blazing ferocity, her heart chimes out to protect all living creatures. The great thrum calls us home, to meet heart to heart, raw and vulnerable. Carrying us all through the cosmos, on and on, Earth's celestial body rotates through the stars. Each unique organism is invited to cherish inter-being and sustain life on Earth. Each can live in sync with, or fight, Earth's wondrous pounding heart.

Photo by Toby Chown: 'Reflections in the Stort'

Halina Pytlaskinska is a humanistic-transpersonal therapist, who delivers couples and individual work, clinical supervision, CPD workshops and workplace training. Over 30 years, she has worked for charities, universities and colleges as a counsellor, trainer and lecturer. She has created a model of interbeing to develop her ecotherapeutic practice, facilitate dream groups and work with CPA's 'Decolonising ourselves' group. Halina can be found at: https://www.creativespacecounselling.com

2. https://www.cshwhalingmuseum.org/blog/5-things-you-never-knew-about-a-whales-heart

3. Sams, J. and Carson, D. (1988). *WW*. Santa Fe: Bear & Co.

4. https://www.sciencefocus.com/planet-earth/what-is-at-earths-core

Professor Anne Poelina: "Wake up the snake"

Edited by Sally Gillespie

The text of this article is made up of transcribed extracts from the Between Stories Roundtable conversation[1] on the theme of deep time, hosted by the Anthropocene Transition Network.[2]

Professor Anne Poelina is a Nyikina Warrwa (Indigenous Australian) woman who belongs to the Mardoowarra – the lower Fitzroy River in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Professor Poelina is an active Indigenous community leader, human and earth rights advocate, filmmaker and a respected academic researcher, with a Doctor of Philosophy (Indigenous Wellbeing), Doctor of Philosophy (First Law), Master of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, Master of Education, Master of Arts (Indigenous Social Policy).[3]

On deep time and ceremony

From our culture we dream; we dream Country, we dream everything into becoming, either reality, or some presence in the future. You cannot understand these concepts unless you share the values, ethics, the belief system that we have, because it is from a different worldview. It's different from a philosophical standpoint. In order to come with us and dream Country and understand deep time, we have to understand that time is not lateral; it is in a circle. In my language, we have a word called *Bookarrarra* which means the past, the present and the future, fused in this moment now, in which we must ethically act to either do something or not do something. All of these concepts are really deeply embedded within a totally different construct of a different worldview, of how we become, how we be, and how we must be.

I think the journey requires something that somebody said to me from the United States, which is that if you want to be a brave, you have to be brave. If you want to reach your full potential as a human being, you must open your mind, your heart and your spirit to these new becomings, because without them you will not reach your full potential, because you will have missed the ancient wisdoms that have grounded our understanding of who we are, and who we must become. How we want you to do these things, how we want you to be building a relationship with Country, is so critical in terms of understanding and feeling Country. Country is alive. The rivers are alive. This is what we are wanting to expose you to. It takes time because you must build your own relationship with the world around you, and with those things that people may see as not being living. Everything is about balance, everything is about harmony. The critical point I want to make as an Indigenous leader is that everything is about peace making. As diplomats, we are born into the world looking for reason and logic and meaning.

This concept around deep time is very special, but you have to unblock your mind. A lot of people come to us and ask, "What is the answer?" You have to unblock your mind and see the world, and be in the world in a different way. So, as I said, time for me is in a circle because we don't see things laterally, we dream things to us and for us. From our culture, we dream Country, we dream everything into becoming either reality or some presence in the future.

We call our elders in our dreams. That's why when people pass away in my culture, we have a sorry time, but when the time is right we call them back to us. It's wonderful. In my lifetime I have met amazing elders, who have told me before they left, "You call me when you need me". And this is what I do. I call my elders to me, they come to me in dreams and we have lots of conversations in terms of how we strategise. In order to believe, this requires you, as a human being, to unpack your blocked system and see the world and be in the world in a different way. Dreaming time, deep time, circle of time, regeneration time and also genetic memory; these concepts are out there. They're in the world. We just need to learn how to make them work for us, if we are doing greater good.

Thirty years ago there was an amazing quantum physicist and anthropologist called David Maybury-Lewis, who produced a documentary. One of the things that struck me from his body of work is: what is reality?, what is real? In the film he holds a rock in his hand and then he crushes that rock. So, is it a rock or is it a particle? What is truth? What is reality? What is this thing we have to unlearn in our minds as human beings, because we have become so compacted with not learning how to see and feel the world in which we are?

Ceremony is very, very important. Ceremony is being in relationship, where everything around you is alive and you must be in communication with it. What we are talking about is energy:

1. Videos of the Between Stories Roundtable sessions are available at: https://www.ageoftransition.org/blank-2

2. https://www.ageoftransition.org

3. Find more about the Professor's work at:
https://www.cdu.edu.au/northern-institute/our-adjuncts/anne-poelina
https://www.majala.com.au
https://www.martuwarrafitzroyriver.orge

energy systems, life forces. Ceremony is very much embedded in respect, in protocol, in diplomacy. When you do ceremony, there is an awakening, there is an opening that allows you to go through. It's like an energy portal. You can deep dive in terms of being with Country, hearing the elders from the past, seeing them into the future. Ceremony is vital. We can't lose ceremony. Sometimes people go, "What about the stolen generations? What about people who don't know the Country? What about whitefellas?" We can teach you to feel it, to hear it, to see it.

One of the things about ceremony is the connectivity to land. When you dance, Earth can feel the vibrations. The land is not lonely, because you are evoking energy systems and memory. The Extinction Rebellion people go, "If we are so stupid that humans befall our own demise, Mother Earth will right-size herself because she has that power". I say, "She would be lonely without the vibration of human beings". It's a connection between the different energy systems, from human to non-human. So, when we dance and connect to the Earth, we can feel the power of the Earth, but the Earth will also feel us and evoke power in us. The most important thing is to honour the agency of Earth, these are living systems that we are all birthed from and that we will all go back into.

Photo by Lachie Carracher: Martuwarra River Country

On opening up to Indigenous peoples

Stop othering us! There's a wisdom in us which is ancient, ancient, ancient. When you connect with Indigenous people across the world, it's the same story. There is a sameness. We are human beings. I even go as far as to say we are all indigenous to mother Earth. She doesn't look at what colour our skin is, what our language is. She wants to see that you can feel her, that you can hear her. What we are saying as Indigenous people is, it's about stewardship and your ethics of care and love and attention. Wherever you are, you need to form your own relationship, because this is about your obligation to yourself as a human being to reach your full potential. If you are missing these experiential learnings, you could never be fully human.

So, what we are saying is that we can teach you, we can show you, but the most important thing for you as a human being is to have a commitment and a law of obligation that you want to know your Country, you want to create this relationship, you want to feel your Country, you want to be a part of it.… Sit on the bank of the river. You know, it's quite funny because you hear these conversations about tree huggers and you go like, "Who are they? New age?" But when you feel and wrap your arms around a tree that has been standing there with wisdom and as a sentinel being, when you feel that and you hug it, there is an exchange of vibration, there is an exchange of energy, there is an exchange of healing.

What I am saying to people is that you need to find your way. You need to unlearn some of those things that have locked you up from experiencing: one getting to know Indigenous people; two to feel this land and the living water system. Probably every person I know who has engaged with Indigenous people across the globe will tell you that their world has been totally transformed, because this is a wisdom and an energy system that is only held by Indigenous people who know ceremony, who can communicate in all the different places.

So, I'd say you have got nothing to lose. You can only win. Go for it, try it. This is an invitation to everyone. Everything is place based. This is the law of the land not the law of man. The land is alive. It is an active witness in our daily lives. So, be brave and if you want to go on a journey of an experiment, I think that you owe it to yourself as a human being to push these things and to try it. You'll never look back.

On mining in Australia

What have we done? What are we still doing? This is all about energy, we are destroying the energy systems of the Earth, so everything is out of whack, everything is out of balance. We need to come back to that place of going, "I hear you". We're moving rocks, we're moving gas, we're moving rivers, so we have a lot to be accountable for as human beings in the destruction of our planet. What we're saying is that we need to coalesce and build this coalition of hope, because we can no longer rely on our governments to lead where the revolution needs to go. So, I think we just do what we do. We dream big and we understand that these systems have become unbalanced.

We, as human beings, and our multi-species friends looking for justice, are also relying on us to do the right thing. I think this is in a waiting time, this is in deep time. We don't know what the true cost burden is going to be for shifting all these energy systems, but they're out of whack right now, and unless we dance and have ceremony and bring this back into a space where we can heal the lands, the living waters and all this injustice, we won't be able to do what we need to do. It's a great opportunity. You know we're all here, we're committed to this place and space. We've got to learn to dream big and send the dream out, but not just send to it out, walk in it and make it reality.

This is not a job for me; it is destiny. It's a huge cost, not only because what you are trying to do is teach other people to learn and see the world in a different way, but you're dealing with the injustices that are brought on Indigenous people. It's extremely difficult to have peace and treaty when we continually have invasive, unjust, colonial development rammed down our necks. I think we need multiple ways to tell the story. We need science, but we also need to be transforming the legal pluralism. That's why we are writing around ancestral personhood and giving rivers recognition. What I want to give a plug for is creativity in communication – dance, ceremony, poetry, film – new ways to bring the revolution to ordinary people. To bring the people with us, to wake up their consciousness – as we say, "Wake up the snake".

Decentring
A group dialogue among CPA members

Edited by Sally Gillespie

For this issue, we invited Matt Adams, Nadine Andrews, Stephanie Gooding, Chris Robertson and Mary Jayne Rust to tease out what 'decentring the human' might mean, feel like and involve, in relation to climate psychology and life in general. The dialogue kicked off with Chris's question about eco-linguistics, opening up a conversation about language, consciousness, social conditioning, grief and love.

Photo by Toby Chown: 'Decentring the human'

On eco-linguistics

Chris: I could start by asking Nadine about eco-linguistics, because one of the things I've focused on is the notion that humans have this special dispensation of language, which separates us out. And this claim is highly problematic for all sorts of reasons. I've had lots of conversations with dogs, for instance, and more difficult, but interesting, conversations with trees. There's a great Kafka story[1] about the ape who is taught to take on human characteristics and speak English, and is asked to give a lecture to the Academy of Science. They asked him about his life as an ape. And he says, "I've no idea, because it's been erased in learning to speak Anglo Saxon". I'm not doing that story justice, but I very much enjoyed it. So eco-linguistics, I mean, is there a non eco-linguistics?

Nadine: It's a really wide field and it encompasses both scholars that look at the diversity of language, and the ecology of language. And, which is more where I'm coming from, people that look at how the way that we use language might promote or undermine pro-environmental behaviour or nature connection. I got massively obsessed with the way that the English language is quite dominated by nouns, by object language, as opposed to process language, and the implications of that. We use this term 'nature' as a mass noun, and the phrase 'being in nature'. Then nature is this container that you can be inside or outside, with the implication that the default is outside. By making things nouns, they have a boundary that allows you to own them, and ownership then allows for exploitation. Like, how would you own a process? Monetise it? If you couldn't actually draw a boundary and say, "This is my land", or this is my something?

Mary Jayne: One very obvious thing in terms of our language is that humans are subjects, referred to as 'she', 'he', or 'who', whereas the other-than-human world is objectified, referred to as 'it' and 'what'.

Nadine: Exactly, so that shift from subject-object to subject-subject is part of decentring. What I love is that as somebody who grew up Catholic, Pope Francis wrote about exactly this in his encyclical, *Laudato Si.*[2] In there, he has this whole section all about subject-object. It is amazing! It's actually very similar to how I would talk about it and also connects to a lot of Indigenous understandings. He says that the Christian idea of 'dominion over' was basically a misinterpretation. It's tragic, isn't it?

Stephanie: I was really interested in what you're saying about creating a boundary around something, making it an object, which then becomes ownership. It sounded very like a central piece of Buddhist reasoning, where a fundamental mistake is turning things into objects, giving them inherent existence, so you've got one object here divided from that object there, and a chasm between them. And then this leap of imagination, which makes my object here more important than yours over there, and from there, all the sufferings of human life have emerged. It's like a cognitive mistake.

Chris: And then there's Winnicott saying there's no such thing as a baby; the baby is always in relationship with the mother. Therefore there's no such thing as a baby by itself. Maybe there is no such thing as a baby noun, with boundaries around it. It's a mother-baby being process, a relational dance that's going on. I think most parents are aware of that reciprocal dance. And does the child make the adult into a parent or vice versa? It's always mutual and reciprocal. One other little thing about reciprocity that I love is in

1. https://www.kafka-online.info/a-report-for-an-academy.html

2. Pope Francis (2015). *Laudato Si: on care for our common home*. Rome: Associazone Amici del Papa.

evolution, the grass is as much an agent as the horse's teeth, they co-evolved together.

Nadine: That reminds me of this study they did with Chinese and American students. So cows, chicken, grass. People were asked which two go together. The American students tended to put cows and chickens together because they're both objects of a similar type, whereas the Chinese students tended to put cows and grass together.[3]

Stephanie: This reminds me of some findings around social class. There were these old studies where middle-class pupils would explain things in terms of their abstract category while working-class pupils would describe their function in a more process or contextual way, or with an example. Maybe this suggests something in our Western education system that develops a way of thinking that's more divided, or maybe it's a cultural thing within the strong class structure of the UK.

Mary Jayne: One of the most difficult things, in decentring the human, is changing a lifetime of how we see ourselves in relation to the Earth. For example, when making decisions about health, it is not just about humans – we must also take into account the health of the ecosystem. Another example is how we recover from major trauma. In the Australian fires, millions of creatures and beings lost their lives. Many people felt terrible grief about this loss – but how do we mark and mourn that? How do we grieve the loss of land? Where are the funerals or memorials for the other-than-human world? The other side of that is the love that can come from decentring ourselves as humans. When we see the more-than-human world as a collection of objects, we turn only to humans for love. Yet those of us who live with animal companions know the unconditional love in these relationships. But it's so much greater than that, isn't it, when we think of how we might experience love within our relationship with the whole of nature.

Photo by Toby Chown: 'Strange light'

Decentring which humans?

The dialogue moves on to tackle the question of who are the humans who need to decentre, the tensions and challenges in discussing and practising decentring, and the experience of being on the margins.

Matt: What I found interesting teaching decentring, and talking to people about it, is the challenges and tensions that come up when you're trying to discuss it. One of these tensions is around thinking about human exceptionalism. Who is it an issue for? Who is it a matter for? Which humans in particular? And a related question about decentring a historically culturally specific notion and experience of being 'the human'. One that still has a great deal of power. Some conversations I've had – there's, "What do you mean, we should be prioritising the non-human, when we're still not managing to prioritise certain groups of humans who fall by the wayside or who are marginalised by this notion of the human?" I think we're talking about a very specific notion of the human that needs decentring.

Chris: Could you say a bit more about this?

Matt: From my background in critical psychology, it's partly around methodological individualism; this idea of the bounded individual that anthropologists and psychologists have long pointed out as peculiar, in terms of the world's understandings of the human. But it's taken on a different cadence and urgency around the shift to recognise, in biology and the humanities, the human connection to other species and to what we will call 'nature'. There is the challenge of that bounded notion of the human and what we're contrasting it with. Another way you could put this is which versions of the human don't need decentring? Lots of contemporary Indigenous knowledges are very different, and are already post-human, as one anthropologist put it. If we dug down into any contemporary Indigenous knowledges, what we will find in common there I think, speaking from the outside, is some forms of animism, some kind of alive, complex articulation of what we would call non-dualism, and a relationship to the wider world that is decentred already. It's important to make those distinctions and not to universalise in that sense.

Another tension, to give a specific instance, was a guy in Afghanistan who worked for an animal charity when they were trying to get British nationals, as well as others, out of Afghanistan. He managed to get lots of animals out on a plane. I thought it was really fascinating the debate that ensued about whether that was the right thing to do. Who should have been on that plane? And the answer to that isn't straightforward. There's lots of debate that the government wasn't paying enough attention to people on the ground – caring enough. Yet they were caring about animals. The tension here isn't that it's just about humans and non-human. It's about who gets more or less valued as human, who gets more or less valued as animals. The tensions that I've seen around post-humanism, particularly when you're doing all this non-human stuff, is saying should we care more about animals when some of the issues that are facing groups of humans are still too raw, too alive, for something else to be prioritised. The Afghanistan evacuation of animals is a good point to talk through those issues. I certainly don't have any answers. It's about working through those tensions, which is the most interesting thing.

3. https://omniglot.com/language/articles/geographyofthought.htm

Nadine: So, I was going to come in saying something about BME and BAME – that terminology which I've always despised, largely because I really hate being labelled. But also, because it doesn't make any sense. It doesn't satisfy my logical mind. I used to work in the field of diversity in the arts sector, and then I got really sick of it and I've not paid much attention to it since then from an academic point of view. But I became aware that, in the past year, more people were speaking out against that term. Some quite interesting people and weirdly also people that I would normally find myself on the opposite political spectrum to. It is this thing about being at the margins, or who's at the centre, and that term 'ethnic minority' that then locks you into this position. When your subjective experience – which is maybe what you're getting at a little bit Matt – is so full of multiple different experiences of being in all these different positions that move around all the time. Also, being at the margins in ecosystems is the most diverse and exciting place to be. So, why would you want to be in the centre anyway, because that's the least creative place.

The other thing I started thinking about was to do with the link with Indigenous wisdom and how I would say I was a bio-psycho-social-spiritual researcher. I'm becoming less embarrassed to use this language of spirituality. You started off, Mary Jayne, saying how difficult it is to change the language because when you start to try and use different frames, it just sounds weird.

Experimenting with different stuff – mainly North American shamanism – didn't quite work for me. I wanted something British-based, because I live in Britain, which got me into Druidry. The thing is that there's not many black people into Druidry, so I have to deal with turning up to a group and thinking is my sense of 'otherness' just in my head? Or not? Am I what people expect when they see me? Or is this just me layering that in? It's impossible to know, but you can't help but think about it. I guess white people might have that if they're coming in with things around class. It's one of these things about fitting in. And so the decentring thing is about, "What are you trying to fit in with, or not fit in with?", as well.

Matt: What I've noticed is about what I would call a relational, or reciprocal ontology, or a way of being. For me, that makes sense, because I come from a background in critical psychology, which for a long time took aim at mainstream psychology. The problem with mainstream psychology partly being that it took this social construction of a boundaried, separate and discrete individual looking out for himself as a universally essential, given, real thing. Critical psychology said, "Actually, we can develop a psychology that's more attuned to our relationship with each other". My journey into the more-than-human, is thinking, "Well, that's true. I'm sold on that and have been for a long time". But also, it's about extending this relational ontology beyond the boundaries of the human into our relationships to the non-human. What still amazes me is that a great deal of psychology hasn't pushed beyond that barrier at all. It is still human exceptionalist; as if the rest of the world, the rest of the Earth, is an innate backdrop in which humans play out their games. So, that's what I want to decentre, that's what I want to be on the margins of. Like you say, Nadine, maybe it's better in the margins. Critical psychology is doing that too, and that's the thread that runs through this desire to decentre the human. It's about that sense of reciprocity running all the way down, as Donna Haraway would say.

Psychology's slow embrace of ecological embeddedness

Reciprocity brings the conversation around to recognition of interdependence and relational awareness, and the question of why psychologies have been so slow in their recognition of human experience being nested within Earth processes.

Chris: That makes me feel sad. Most Indigenous philosophies, beliefs, whatever we want to call them, have a sense of gratitude and obligation to the Earth, to the ancestors. Western culture seems to have bred this completely alienated, self-centred, entitled human. I mean, look at our leaders as paradigm examples. I find it tragic that we've lost that sense of not only connectedness, but obligation to the others who have conspired to give us our life.

Matt: But I'd say, we're finding it, not losing it, in many ways. Science is recognising this concept of the holobiont, that we are actually fundamentally dependent on the microbiome. I think there is a shift towards a recognition of this connection, rather than a move away from it. Whether it's in time or too late, or whether it's just a niche, cultural shift, I don't know. But I think there is a shift towards this recognition of interdependence.

Mary Jayne: It's interesting that psychology is one of the last professions to catch up with these issues. I met a different view when I was in New Zealand, where I heard the Maori introduce themselves through their connections with place and people. They start with their mountain, then their river or sea, their tribe, their genealogy, and then the very last thing that you add on is me.[4] I think this is great. Yet, when we introduce ourselves in this culture, we start with 'me'. In therapy, we include our ancestors, but we don't expect to include our Earth stories. Therapy is about telling our human stories about human relationships. Even though we insist there should be no agenda in therapy, actually both therapist and client are influenced by cultural norms.

Nadine: Mary Jayne, why do you think that psychologies have not been embracing the interconnectedness thing?

Mary Jayne: I think there's lots of different reasons. One is that psychology has grown up in urban rather than rural places, with a focus on the inner world, which has, in some circles of psychotherapy, become cut off from the outer world. Actually, Jung did write about his relationship with nature, including, for example, how his relationship with stone became part of his inner world. But he remains one of the few psychotherapists to do that. What do other people think. Why are the psychological professions some of the last to catch up with this?

Stephanie: I'm not sure that they are, because the idea of the autonomous bounded self has been criticised for decades in psychology, and postmodern psychology is very much getting into process and the relatedness of ourselves as processes in relation to our environments. Though it is still pretty silent on the natural environment and the impact of non-human relationships on how we think about the processes that we're caught up in. We're still quite silent on that.

Chris: There's a huge defence against this. It's true, what Matt was saying, there's a lot of scientific advances. I was reading something like 1% of humans are human genetic inheritance and

4. https://www.pepeha.nz

the rest is everything else. So, if you have to scrub away all these micro-organisms, you get left with 1% of you. I think that's hugely threatening to this skin encapsulated ego. Freud said psychoanalysis was meant to decentre the human, but I think in a way it's recentred it in this walled-in ego, which has to defend itself against not only the unconscious, but everything outside that feels like it could threaten it – including maybe these new sciences.

Matt: In critical psychology, another problem has been its suspicion of any essentialism – and the natural world fell into that category for a while – so, critical psychologists and even postmodern and post-structuralist thought were sniffy about talking about nature as matter for a while, because of its truck with essentialist categories. So, I think that's partly why critical psychology has been slow to catch up with what's been going on in other disciplines in the last few years around this.

Stephanie: Maybe psychology being behind reflects wider, lay, Western attitudes, going back to your story about Afghanistan, Matt. There was unanimous moral outrage that these animals had been given assistance that could have been given to humans. As a life-long supporter of equal animal rights, I find that position so strange. But my voice is an outsider voice, not represented in media.

Matt: What makes them more or less so? In the world we live in? What makes that feel strange?

Mary Jayne: I think we're still threatened by the idea that we are animals and that many of our cherished notions of how different we are from the rest of life are being eroded. The profession of psychology, alongside cultural norms, seems caught up with quite a lay notion of animals as being the wild and unruly Id. In Jungian circles (and no doubt in other therapies also), an animal in a dream is interpreted as instinct. Yet animals are so much more complex and sophisticated than this.

Sentience isn't just human

At this point in the conversation, Matt had to leave for an appointment, while the rest of the group reflected on the nature of humans and the sentience of the world and the development of a trust in life.

Chris: The book I find fascinating is Kohn's *How forests think: towards an anthropology beyond the human.*[5] There are lots of wonderful stories about the tribe he lived with, their capacity to communicate with other animals, and how they interpret their dog's dreams. One of the key things is about what qualifies as language, and how Western psychological consciousness is very caught up in the symbolic, but in fact signs are everywhere. If you're not caught up in this symbolic notion, then it's much easier to drop into reading the signs. It's a great drop down – especially for Jungians, who are very keen on symbol formation. It's the signs we need to pay attention to and worry less about abstract symbology, which seems to be where humans get lost.

Nadine: Yeah, these Earth-based spiritualities give space for things being a bit more literal. It is actually the spirit of the animals that's communicating, rather than being a symbol of something.

Mary Jayne: And the other-than-human can become our teachers. That really is decentring the human, isn't it?

Chris: That fits with what Matt was saying about the awakening that's coming with science. If we attend to this decentring, we're left with the question, "Well, who are we as a species? What is our place in the planet?" This profound existential question that we start to ask, rather than just assuming our place at the centre.

Mary Jayne: It's very threatening, isn't it? Because we have been brought up in this culture to think of our place as being custodians of the Earth, or that the Earth is a bunch of resources for us to use, as our right. It's very confusing, to suddenly be taken out of that place. For one thing it threatens capitalism, which depends on using the Earth as a resource.

Nadine: It's also extraordinary to think about how the makeup of your gut biome can be influencing your emotions and your decisions. I love that idea but it's freaky! I mean, who's in charge here? Reciprocity comes up quite a bit in some of the practices that I do. In mindfulness, when you're focusing on the different senses, normally you're thinking that you're touching something, but actually you're also *being* touched, and that reframing can really throw you into some strange places. That the wind is touching you, that sounds are touching you. It's giving agency or seeing agency in other processes.

Chris: So, I'm not just walking up the hill; the hill is walking me up it.

Stephanie: My personal reaction to that is to be really uplifted. I feel my personal recovery has been through discovering the world is alive and sentient. Listening to the stories from the trees and the rivers, and knowing my hills inside out is what sustains me. And if I lose touch, and go into the old materialist mentality that what's out there is inanimate, and humans are alone in conscious thought, I find that extremely depressing and deadening inside.

Chris: I completely agree. It's really interesting that many professionals seem threatened by this idea that sentience isn't just human.

Mary Jayne: Are you then seen as entering 'woowoo' territory?

Nadine: It's that language thing, isn't it? You can anticipate people switching off as soon as they hear you say a phrase like that.

This thing about trusting in life – what you were saying, Stephanie – a kind of relief comes from that. I don't need to figure it all out myself. My spiritual journey has really been about a journey towards

5. Kohn, E. (2013). *How forests think: towards an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

trusting in life and that allows me to relax or to surrender to certain things, and to deal with the anxiety of not knowing, or horrible stuff happening. Trusting in life is a practice. It's a discipline. It only works if I keep believing in it. If I start to lose the trust, then things don't work.

Stephanie: Going back to the question earlier about our role as humans, I suppose even that question has a subtle sense of having to consciously choose and control our place. It jars with me, and I suppose animals don't consider themselves so important to define their role. They find foods, make shelter, raise young. Why do we think that we should have a grander role than that at all? Trusting in life for me is that same letting go of this overseeing, monitoring, controlling, dominating mindset. The ecosystem knows how to balance itself. You feel that instinctual pull to go this way rather than that way. It links to what you're saying about signs as well. Sometimes you don't notice the signs because you aren't giving value to the natural world. But, when you start to relate to other species around you as people and part of your community, then you start to notice. It guides you.

Nadine: The hardest bit doing nature connection teaching or coaching is to help people turn something from being an occasional state into a trait, so it becomes part of their day-to-day way of being. People go on a workshop or a retreat but then actually building in that day-to-day noticing is really difficult.

Chris: I'm not sure I'm agreeing with you, Stephanie. Because most Indigenous cultures that I've come across have deep philosophical and religious tenets and philosophies. They're not just naively following whatever happens. So, the idea of their own place in the ecosphere and, even, the questions about who do we eat?, or might I get eaten? I think they're deep, deep existential questions that are important for us, as humans with consciousness, to think about and confront. Where do we live? How do we live?

Stephanie: I suppose I mean that meaning-making can be a relational and contextual process, rather than a concept that I can fix in any state or give it any kind of definition that is stable over time and place. Going back to what Matt said: "Which human, where?" To break it down into something a bit more particular that is relational, because as soon as you're asking about 'humans', you've abstracted that from a context.

Mary Jayne: Can I turn it round a bit? When we have a Western notion of humans at the centre, we think of ourselves as being in charge. If we're decentred, we step away from that. But I find this quite confusing at the moment. For example, in the rewilding projects I know of in the UK, it's not just about humans completely stepping back, as there's still some sort of management going on. But the management is no longer about being in control, or about using nature as a resource – it's about maximizing nature's capacity to restore herself. So, there is a shift towards respecting that the other-than-human-world has its own order – it's not just random chaos to be ordered by humans. That is a huge change in worldview.

Nature awareness as a practice

This observation about respect brings the conversation around to a sharing of personal stories and practices of nature connectedness.

Nadine: Here's an example from my own personal experience; a really mundane thing about gardening. So, sometimes, I will notice in myself this energy that is actually quite violent. There is a task that I've decided needs to happen. I'm ripping and cutting and these things have definitely become objects. Then I'll catch it, I'll notice this energy, and be like, "My god, what are you doing?" It takes a tremendous amount of effort to switch out of that mode. Then other times, I try and do it as a practice of asking permission, to say, "This is what I'm thinking of doing, is that okay?" And, going a bit more softly and lovingly. But, really quickly, it will shift without me noticing, until I catch it again at some point. That violence is definitely linked with speed. It's utterly fascinating.

Stephanie: I think gardening is a huge teaching arena for watching those mindsets. I see my way of gardening completely changing over the last few years. I'm now looking at what I would have labelled weeds, and there's moths sheltering in there and it's shading that. What needs have I got to be taking this or that out? Once you're considering all the residents of the garden as equally important, it leads to a different way of behaving, a much more reciprocal one of tuning in and asking plants what they want. Sometimes they do want a cut back, like a haircut, but not the rampage.

Mary Jayne: One of my practices is to go to the ponds on Hampstead Heath every day. It's about going to a familiar spot, and having a relationship with that place through the seasons. It's where I go to rebalance myself. And, over the years, I have noticed that it's more possible to have conversations with the place and with the other beings who inhabit it, so I find that practice very helpful.

Chris: One of my learning areas is a small pond in the garden that I tend. There are fish in it and I'm very concerned for them. When the heron comes, that is really a stretch for me. Because I don't want the heron to feed on our fish, I catch myself chasing the heron away. If the heron stole one or two fish, I wouldn't mind, but there was one time when it wiped out every single fish in the pond. I felt so upset. So, it's an interesting balance there. They are

Photo by Toby Chown: 'The woods have no centre'

semi-domesticated fish. I don't think they could survive completely by themselves without my support. But other things come to consume them as well. So, they're prey. And, therefore, what's my relationship? It gets really interesting.

Nadine: I have loads of practices, too many to list, but one of the things which I've gotten into recently is the night sky. There are some particular constellations and stars and planets that I just love to see, so I get very excited about that, and I do a lot in my dreams at night as well. Also, I'm thinking a lot about afterlife at the moment, as my mum recently died and I was with her and witnessed the fleeting expression of wonder and joy on her face as she passed. How, after death, there are experiences of presence and signs. It's also just about the mystery of it. I suppose engaging with mystery is a practice in itself.

Chris: That death might be the really critical decentring

Nadine: Isn't it? Like you were saying, Stephanie, you really don't have any control at that point, your consciousness dispersing into the universe.

Mary Jayne: What's burning in my mind is the very simple idea of expressing gratitude; a practice central to Indigenous cultures. And how often do Western humans thank the Earth? If you don't think of the Earth as a sentient being, or the other-than-human world as sentient, then there's no relationship. Why would you thank this object? That seems to be a very big piece; turning that around and the start of reciprocity.

Nadine: I want to acknowledge my cat Mira, who was *amazing* with my mum. In her final days and hours, this constant companion sleeping right next to her, keeping watch over her. This really beautiful, protective, presence that I was not able to provide in the same way, as a human. Just huge amounts of gratitude. It was like she knew what her role was; an unbelievable communication going on between the two of them. And she knew when Mum died. It was just remarkable.

Mary Jayne: You often hear that about cats, don't you? I read some research done in hospices, where it was reported that cats would often know who was the next person to die.

Nadine: The foxes in my garden as well, because in the summer, they had these cubs that would come in all the time. They would drink out of my Mum's cup of water. They basically hung out with us and the cats, but they'd come up to my Mum and nip her. They didn't do that with me. It was like really gentle nips, but it was really weird, as if they were checking out how alive she was.

Stephanie: As well as gratitude, the other virtue coming to mind to cultivate in the process of decentring ourselves is humility; and to apply these ideas to eco-anxiety, for me, it helps to remember that I don't have to do it all, that I am just one part of the ecosystem. Going back to trust, knowing that you'll know the right thing to do and what role to take in a given moment. It's there in the story of your cat as well. When the time comes, you will know. And that comes from within, a kind of welling up that is from beyond our own individual psychology. It comes from the subtle communication from the whole ecosystem; those little promptings at the edge of awareness.

Matthew Adams is a Principal Lecturer in Psychology in the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Brighton.

Nadine Andrews is a bio-psycho-social-spiritual researcher, and a mindfulness and nature-based trainer and coach.

Stephanie Gooding is a counselling psychologist in Angus, Scotland, who works outdoors with clients and offers 'Earthworks' – a personal development ecopsychology programme.

Chris Robertson is ex-CPA Chair, co-founder of Re-Vision and co-author of *Climate psychology: a matter of life and death*. Phoenix Publishing House, 2022.

Mary-Jayne Rust is an ecopsychologist in London UK and the author of *Towards an ecopsychotherapy*. Confer Books, 2019.

These winters without ice

By Joanna Gilar

These winters without ice
are strange
in their blanched lucidity
of mud and earth.

The world is burning
what is to come
is burning;
we are alone
between
the past
and future,
an island
ringed by murk and ghouls
and by propensities
for unusual hope.

Disease is rife
so too a strange
blindness
where vision
depends
on the swerve of hot pixels.

It is not safe
to walk across a field
with its ribbed branches
of wet shadow
and see a squirrel breathing
because then we remember
who is burning.

If I was to
record
what happened
I would say nurses worked their hearts to the bone,
and we could not breathe.

If I was to record
our precognitions
I would say
the spider webs
were grey upon our blood trees,
and birds flew
uncaptioned
across the skimming sky.

This place
where we cannot see to look
is nobody's.
Only occasionally
a glance in the direction
of time
and the heart shatters
into ribs
of obsolete
cold.

How to enter the zone: discovering dialogue with other-than-human life

By Kelvin Hall

The work of Lawrence Anthony (2009)[1] with elephants, Geoffrey McMullan (2020[2] and 2013[3]) with birds, Jane Goodall (1971)[4] with chimpanzees, Charlie Russell (2002)[5] with bears, Peter Godfrey-Smith (2016)[6] with octopi, Joanne Lauck (1988)[7] with insects; all these bear witness to the fluency, intimacy and mutual regard which can characterise the human encounter with other life. These are a few names chosen out of many other possible examples of published accounts, in which human and other in effect discover a shared language – non-verbal but, if anything, more eloquent for that reason. Likewise, there are countless daily encounters experienced by people who will never make public what has occurred, in which another creature approaches them or becomes approachable, and some heartfelt sense of reciprocal recognition occurs. Perhaps a domestic or wild animal shows a particularly appropriate or empathetic response to human mood. Perhaps a human seems to feel exactly what it is like to be another creature and sees the world through their eyes.

How do such moments come about? Comparing many accounts of the encounter between human and other – from published writings, my own research interviews and chance conversations – it becomes possible to identify conditions which favour entry to this 'zone'. They consist partly of specific attitudes such as attentive and positive regard, but there are also certain states of being such as grief, and modes of perception such as seeing through 'soft eyes', which I will amplify later in this essay. Many of these conditions seem to be fulfilled spontaneously and unconsciously by some children, who readily and unquestioningly feel fellowship with other creatures, or delight in the wonders of the natural world. This can become buried and then sometimes re-emerge in adulthood.

One woman has an early childhood photo of herself still in nappies, lying flopped out, completely relaxed on top of the calmly dozing form of her grandmother's dog. Later in her childhood, when she was six, the same woman remembers one of the most powerful dreams of her life:

> *I dreamed I was in the jungle and had befriended a leopard. My mother remembers it too because I wouldn't shut up about it and I would draw pictures of it.*

Decades later as a grown-up, the same kind of affinity re-appeared:

> *A few years ago I dreamed that I had an aye-aye, as what I can only describe as my daemon. The connection I had to the animals in both was sublime.*

One young man told me that when he was small, his parents tended to be lax about keeping track of his wanderings and, on one occasion, lost him on a visit to the Florida mangrove swamps. After a long search, they found him sitting still by the water's edge and asked him if he'd been worried. He told them he'd been enjoying the company of a friend the whole time, and it was only then that they saw the alligator floating in the pool next to him. He continued to feel comfortable with reptiles throughout his life and to this day spends much time with them.

A young woman told me how her childhood was populated with tree people and insect people and others. How she might spend two hours hugging a goose, or long periods being cradled by trees, or voicing various spontaneously created songs that brought different species into close contact. She also recounted how she discovered that there were ways of moving her body with which these felt comfortable and which enabled them to stay settled upon her. This applied particularly to insects, so that to this day she feels particularly at home with them, and indeed the creation of a charity to protect the ravaged bee population became her vocation for a decade.

One told me that her very earliest memory was of lifting earthworms towards her lips, anticipating the intimacy of touch. But this was interrupted by the cry of alarm, "Stop her!" from mother to father. Thereafter, she felt her home setting was overly hygienic and excluding of other life. This incident resonates with the recollections of renowned primatologist, Jane Goodall, who said:

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1. Anthony, L. (2009). *The elephant whisperer.* Reprint, London: Pan Books (2018).

2. McMullan, G. (2020). *More birds than bullets*. Pathfinder-UK.

3. McMullan, G. (2013). *Discover nature awareness*. Pathfinder-UK.

4. Goodall, J. (1971). *In the shadow of man.* Reprint, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson (1988).

5. Russell, C., and Enns, M., with Stenson, F. (2002). *Grizzly heart: living without fear among the brown bears of Kamchatka*. Reprint, Toronto: Vintage (2003).

6. Godfrey-Smith, P. (2016). *Other minds: the octopus, the sea, and the deep origins of consciousness*. Glasgow: William Collins.

7. Lauck, J.E. (1998). *The voice of the infinite in the small.* Mill Spring: Blue Water Publishing.

I was born feeling close to animals. At one-and-a-half years old, I was found by my mother, in bed with a handful of earthworms.[8]

Image by Asli Sonceley

When this kind of affinity emerges into adult consciousness, it is frequently accompanied by feelings of sadness and longing, and it is often possible to find a biographical explanation for this. Many individuals recount the severance from connection which they remember at some stage in their early life. For one of my interviewees, "everything was connected" until at age nine she was sent to boarding school and the connectedness was replaced by "emptiness", which persisted for years until a rediscovery of the land around her in adulthood.

Another wrote:

As an only child growing up on a hill farm in Snowdonia, with elderly parents and no TV, animals were my siblings. I had a terrier called Del who I spoke to as my sister. I conversed easily with rocks, trees, houses, rooms... When I had some kind of a breakdown while at boarding school at the age of 12, and was sent home to recover, it was firstly to the horses that I went. (Tudor, 2014, p.20).[9]

Paradoxically, while the loss of this ecological self can be traumatic, in other cases it can be trauma that awakens it. Indeed Derrick Jensen's (2000)[10] seminal work on conversation with nature is based on the story of the severe childhood abuse he suffered, in reaction to which he found love and appreciation in his natural surroundings. One woman (Moultrie, 2017, p.4)[11] wrote that, after her mother abandoned the family home when she was seven:

…a wave of grief… engulfed the family. What remained constant was the presence of animals and the natural world. As light dimmed on human relationships, at least for a time, another world seemed to open up to me in a vivid way.

Herbalism teacher and writer Nathaniel Hughes partially attributes his great sensitivity to plant life to birth trauma. Roger Duncan writes:

My personal journey into exploring a new relationship with nature perhaps grew out of my early life experience of adoption that resulted in a distrust of the human world and an attraction to a connection with nature instead (2018, p. xiv).[12]

Dissenters might see this as an idealisation of childhood. While Bernstein (2005, p.150),[13] in his landmark work, affirms that the 'borderland' consciousness (experience of intimate and 'transrational' communication with other life) is "a normal developmental state.... prior to the age of six or seven", some academic studies seem to offer a different picture. A study by Kellert (1996)[14] describes the "fear" and "indifference" towards the natural world of children under the age of six, and their lack of "appreciation of the autonomous feelings and independence of animals" (Kahn, 1999, p.180).[15] While conceding that most of the accounts I have quoted here are drawn from adults remembering their childhood – that is, constructing a narrative – they at the very least record a longing that remains in the human heart for a world of reciprocal relationship, sometimes glimpsed, even if only briefly.

Something similar to those childhood experiences seems to occur for adults in a state of grief, who have perhaps lost the assumptions about the world they held before bereavement or loss, and who are open to new perceptions. One woman had suffered multiple bereavements and was "drowning in grief". A succession of encounters then occurred. In one, while on a walk, she came upon a group of several moles in the grass. They showed no fear and one of them allowed her to stroke it. Her dog, rather than try to chase the moles, sat down quietly and watched. In another, while she sat in her garden, a young fox came through the garden hedge, sat with her, exchanging eye contact for a prolonged period. The fox then stayed waiting while she went indoors to find a lump of cheese, received the cheese from her hand, and later, after a further stay, departed. Other people have told me of visitations from deer and hedgehogs.

Mark Cocker (2013)[16] narrates the case of the bereaved mother, when 'something' told her to go through the French windows at the other side of the house and there, sitting on the patio, was a kingfisher that she picked up and stroked before the bird finally flew away – a moment of intimacy which was "a mystifying solace" to her over the years. Nathaniel Hughes has stated explicitly that his sense of plants as beings became enhanced when he was in a state of grief following relationship break-ups.

8. 'Private passions'. BBC Radio 3, 22 May 2016.

9. Tudor, R. (2014). 'Becoming more human in a thickening world'. Qualifying MA dissertation, Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling.

10. Jensen, D. (2000). *A language older than words*. London: Souvenir Press.

11. Moultrie, D. (2017). 'Relational learning from the natural world'. Qualifying MA dissertation, Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling.

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The loss of human relationship has been crucial to my coming into relationship with plants. Sensitivity arises from separation. As we regain and increase the experience of nature, we also experience the wound that caused it to diminish in the first place (taped interview, 2013).[17]

Helen MacDonald's (2014)[18] best-selling memoir of hawk/human partnership is, of course, set within a context of searing bereavement following the death of her father. This loss both motivates the search for reciprocal understanding and heightens the perceptions of what transpires. Perhaps a widespread grief over the irreversible environmental losses already inevitable due to climate change is also bringing about a sensitivity to the value of other-than-human life, which is actually facilitating contact between human and other. The extent to which other creatures somehow attune to the way humans are when grieving, or to which the state of grief allows the human to be more attuned to the other creature, remains open to inquiry.

I have also heard accounts of extraordinary encounters which occurred when individuals were 'lost'; either in the metaphorical sense of reaching a series of dead ends in their life, or in the literal sense of not being able to find their way back to safety in a strange landscape. In one, a man living in Alaska 'heard' an Arctic fox tell him to turn back from the place he'd gone to attempt suicide; in another a woman lost in the African bush received precise and accurate directions from a large rock.

Among the qualities or attitudes which travellers in the zone often display is the readiness to regard the perceptions and the 'culture' of the other as completely valid even though they differ from the human; a willingness for the human to put himself into the skin of the other and begin to see the world as they do (indeed, there's often a longing to become a bi-lingual member of that other culture). For example, to enter the horse world a human has to understand that their foot movements convey important messages, since for horses this is as eloquent as eye contact is for humans, making a great variety of statements about the claiming and yielding of space. Similarly, those cultivating the company of snakes must recognise that a snake's first lunge towards them is often a demand for their space to be respected, and not an actual attack. One young woman I interviewed had, from early childhood, a sense of being in conversation with insects, and offered the following illustration:

A bumble bee, when he is beginning to be scared or angry, raises his middle legs. This is the time for a human to back off, whereas at other moments it's alright to come close. Playing on this, human and bee can come into a dance.

Such individuals also develop the quality of clear intention. Trying to preserve an endangered and much-feared group of elephants, Lawrence Anthony (2009)[19] attributed his breakthrough transaction with the matriarch to those moments in which he stood before her, persistently holding in his mind the intention of saving her herd. She eventually reached out and stroked him with her trunk, and a story of shared co-operation unfolded thereafter.

Once, a woman told me that she had been sitting in her garden and saw a blackbird nearby. She had recently spent time with the well-known animal communicator Anna Breytenbach and learned some of her method. She held in her mind an image of the blackbird landing on her lap, and the blackbird then did so. The day after hearing this, I was sitting in my garden thinking about

Image by Asli Sonceley

this, and as I did so a robin landed on my head. As this was completely unexpected, I jolted and the robin flew off a little way, leaving me to ponder the possible connections between these events.

While people who become at home in this zone are attentive to and aware of the other, they also tend to display remarkable steadiness where other people might feel uneasy. The woman who collects wasps upon her hand, one after another, to free them from a room full of fretting humans; the beekeeper who opens a hive and caresses the bees with his moustache; the man who sits next to a grizzly bear as they both stare out over the waters of the lake: these people demonstrate how far the peril is reduced by their own state of mind.

Geoffrey McMullan (2013)[20] recommends the adoption of *peripheral vision*, an awareness of what arises on the margins of one's field of vision. This is the opposite of the highly focused *tunnel vision* which characterises the predator approaching prey, and also humans when they are being very goal-orientated. As well as enabling humans to become more aware of the responses of the natural life around them, this invites the proximity of other creatures and immersion in the present moment. In the same way, equine therapy practitioners become very aware of the value of maintaining 'soft eyes', which seem to make horses more at ease. This is often accompanied by acute awareness of contact boundaries over distance. The quivering of a horse's muscle, the lifting of a head, the flicking of a tail, can indicate that one's presence and manner is being registered by the horse 30 yards away (or indeed much further). The softening of human focus and posture often results in the horse relaxing and showing readiness to allow the human to come closer.

17. See Hughes, N. (2014). *Intuitive herbalism. Honouring our indigenous plants. Walking the path of healing*. Nailsworth: Quintessence Press.

18. Macdonald, H. (2014). *H is for hawk*. London: Jonathan Cape.

19. Ibid, p.85.

20. Ibid, p.24.

Image by Asli Sonceley

It is with relatively little surprise that I read of Lawrence Anthony embodying, in his elephant work, some of these same qualities which I had found so effective in my dealings with horses. It is more provocative when I read very similar evocations in the words of herbalist Nathaniel Hughes, concerning his process of connection with plants.

> *What would it mean to honour and respect the invisible, yet felt boundary between yourself and the plant? How would it feel to approach with humility and a simple request in our hearts: "I am honoured to meet you and would very much like to know you better" (Hughes, 2014).*[21]

So, once again the outcome of the encounter links with the self-awareness of the human, and challenges us to really know ourselves and to recognise what we are feeling at every level. I have repeatedly found that when I alter the way I am breathing – making it deeper, slower, less tense – horses respond to me more willingly and more calmly. In other words, other creatures are directly and instantly affected by the way I am in my body and in the moment. This is one of the ways the world around me changes according to my state of being. I speculate that there are innumerable other ways in which this is so.

Charting the different kinds of relational exchange which arise in the zone merits a whole further article (at least); and so too do the ways in which the human self is enhanced and healed by experiencing this. But among the latter is the sense of being in such profound and lucid companionship with other life that the fearful challenges of the current eco-crises become, while no less severe, much less disabling. Whether or not we survive the coming ordeals, the bond we discover in the zone demands to be honoured in attitude and action.

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Kelvin Hall has been a psychotherapist and trainer, integrating outdoor and equine-assisted approaches, until retirement from practice last July. He has written and spoken frequently on ecopsychological themes and is soon to launch a recitation piece entitled: 'How to be on earth: tales from the zone'.

21. Ibid, p.18.

Lost in city lights

By Rachel Cakebread

This space is alien.
Sterile lights;
floating stairs;
minimal vistas;
My lonely bicycle on the concrete pathway.

Am I striving for this lifestyle of luxury?
Fancy drinks in noisy spaces.
Hollow and empty.

My hair is too wild for this room.

Take me to the mountains.
Subtle light;
floating clouds;
wild vistas;
A single tent amongst craggy moss mounds.

I ache for a lifestyle of simple pleasures
Water from a river, quiet.
Vast and teeming.

My heart is soothed in this place.

Climate fiction

Introduced by Maggie Turp

"Scientific papers, however well written, rarely carry the emotional weight of a good story." [1]

Climate fiction immerses us in futures that have already arrived in some parts of the world, and are steadily advancing towards our children and grandchildren in others. Through imaginative identification with fictitious characters, we are confronted with the challenges coming down the line. A classic story arc is one of apparently insuperable difficulties that, after a number of dismaying setbacks, are overcome. The book reviewed on the opposite page has a different feeling tone, focusing instead on the loss and grief of living in a time of ecological decline.

Maggie Turp is a psychotherapist and supervisor, an independent trainer and a writer. In recent years, she has focused her work on climate and ecology-related issues and their consequences for mental health. She is currently on working on a chapter for an edited book, *Holding the hope* (PCCS Books, publication pending).

1. *New Scientist,* 5 Feb 2022, p.34

Stillicide by Cynan Jones

Reviewed by Bernadette McBride

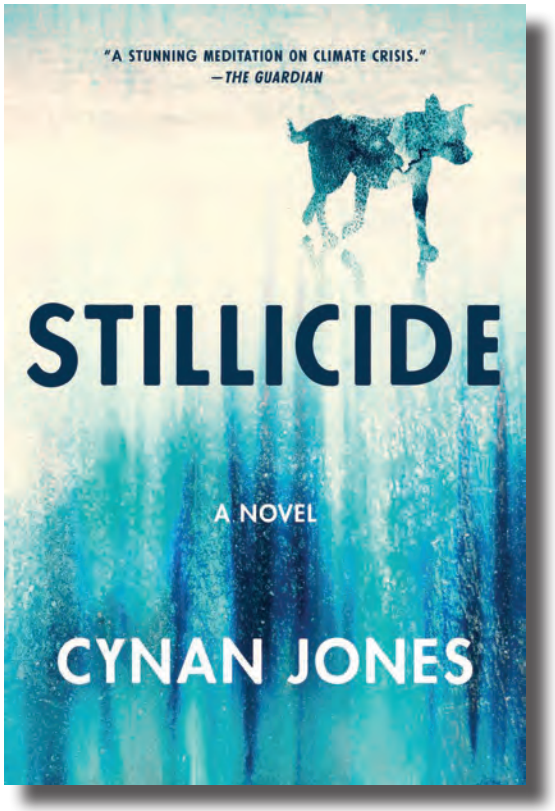
In his sixth novel, *Stillicide* (2019),[1] Welsh writer Cynan Jones forces the reader to pay close attention to distilled imagery almost as clear as the commodified water at the heart of the book. Set against pages of vast white space, an interesting form. Each of the 12 chapters tells a story, like artworks in a gallery set against a white mount. From a professor, to a nurse, a guardsman and a dying wife. The space around their respective stories indicates that, yes, they are alone in their struggles in a climate-ravaged world, but they are also part of the same exhibition. Their pain and valiant efforts to survive the climate crisis are interconnected.

Even a white glacier acts as a metaphor for feelings of emptiness in relation to ecological grief, and our readiness to try and fill huge voids with commodities that are not to the benefit of everyone or globally ethical. For example, part of *Stillicide's* plot involves a plan to drag a glacier to the by-now dry and empty Thames, even though it may displace whole communities. The water train comes into existence to protect a pipeline to the city under threat by looters. It carries millions of gallons of water from a reservoir and is designed with automatic guns to target moving objects close to the tracks. In *Stillicide*, water is a highly sought-after commodity and access to it is far from equal. Such a simple but essential element for life many; today still take for granted.

Jones hits the reader squarely in the face with these sharply but sparely delivered stories of loss and the will to live, leaving to the imagination nothing about the fate we are on course to meet. His writing reflects big feelings back to readers living through an ongoing catastrophe. Moreover, his sitting-with-the-pain style of prose offers recognition of those feelings. How many works of climate fiction can do that?

Already commissioned by BBC4 Radio, pre-publication, as a series of 15-minute readings, the book comprises multiple stories set in a near-future Britain. Many 'cli-fi' novels or stories lean more toward a dystopian narrative to serve as a warning, set in far-off fictional futures readers find hard to imagine or emotionally engage with. Philosopher Glenn Albrecht talks about finding a new language for a new way of feeling amid the climate crisis. One of his key terms, *Solastalgia* – "the homesickness you have when you are still at home" – describes the feelings of distress associated with environmental change close to home (Albrecht, 2003).[2] In climate fiction to date, most works have failed to come close to evoking relational images of the mental distress brought about by living through an ecological decline in real-time. What *Stillicide* does, so marvellously, is to hold the space for ecological grief between its pages.

As one of the characters says: "People get on with it. People have always got on with it. Dystopia is as ridiculous a concept as utopia." I think what Jones achieves with *Stillicide* is to show us a glimpse of humanity that could be as adaptable with its emotions as it is with its technical advances and omnipresent consumerism. After all, it is only by working through denial and toward acceptance that we can ever hope to take any sort of meaningful action in the face of the climate crisis.



Bernadette McBride is a writer and creative practitioner, and a PhD candidate in climate fiction. She was a Manchester Fiction Prize 2020 finalist, and won the Biggest Impact on the City of Liverpool award in 2019 for her work bringing together environmental issues and creative writing workshops. You can follow her on Twitter at @b_mmcbride

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The three spirals of animist ecotherapy

By Harriet Sams

What has fallen apart? It's one of those questions that elicits a wry laugh and a pained expression from me nowadays. "What hasn't?" I reply. That'd take less time to write about. How long have you got? Let's go macro first: Covid, poverty, climate chaos, societal collapses, wars, mineral extractions, warming oceans acidification of our waters, fuel poverty, droughts and deluges, microplastics and "chemicals in everything, including me".[1] On a micro level, we moved house from the UK to France in the middle of the pandemic and just before Brexit. Three children and barely any French between the five of us. Cue meltdowns, extreme isolation, bullying at school, othering in multiple ways in multiple venues, psychological assessment and further othering of one of the children, calcification of one of my arms, a broken car that won't go anywhere, a snake-bitten cat, and paperwork like I never thought possible, let alone necessary. Roll on many months and we have failed to buy a house, failed to make friends, failed to get the tax done for the car, failed in so many small ways. And, still, the world burns.

That's the abridged list. Reading back over it, I well up. How can I find healing amidst all this?

The Land speaks:

> *When did you last walk barefoot in the garden? The birds are calling. The magpies rattle their calls and the mice in the long grass squeak.*

This is ecotherapy spiral one:[2] get connected to that which surrounds you. Earth calls to you, offers healing.

1. Don McLean wrote the lyrics "chemicals in everything, including me" in the song, 'Prime Time'. See https://youtu.be/MgZQxTxR3Oo

2. Ecotherapy tiers one and two described by Linda Buzzell, in Chalquist, C., and Buzzell, L. Eds. (2009). *Ecotherapy: healing with nature in mind.* Berkeley: Counterpoint.

.....

That list of Things that Fell Apart feels smaller now. *Breathe. Yes, this is real. No, it is not all there is.* I am finding personal healing.

How can both the micro and the macro exist at once within us, as well as a way in which to find healing? To understand this, we need to step out from a human-centric perspective, into animist awareness. I mean, we humans are not alone and never have been, and we're the youngest species on the planet. I wouldn't leave my five-year-old in charge of my house, so why do we think we're 'in charge'? Our arrogance staggers me, sometimes.

There is more to this world, these multiverses, than these isolated issues, real as they are, suggest. Ecotherapy spiral one invites us to care for ourselves. One moment at a time, one connection at a time. *Notice.*

The Land speaks again:

> *The Great* I Am *surrounds and penetrates you. Every cell of these bodies belongs to one another's bodies. The air is filled with spores and pollen, ready to cover you over, if you lay down long enough. Can you do that? Could you stop and lie, still and calm, long enough for your wounds to be healed? Is something stopping you? What are you holding onto that is not being met?*

I am a Druid. Long before I undertook six years of Druidic training, I was a prehistoric archaeologist. My soul felt free, when I was deep, deep down into the Earth, excavating through the layers of healing that Earth had given the site, covering it over, soothing its wounds, so that only lumps and bumps and ghosts remained. That part of my life was preceded by a childhood immersed in the ancestors speaking to me. Now, as an ecotherapist and mentor, I have learned that it wasn't just the humans who were speaking to me, but it was Earth themself, with humans as a vivid part, speaking of the covering over of our memories with greenery and brown rich soils.

This is ecotherapy spiral two: we are all connected.

.....

We found the snake skin at an old French-Romano theatre on the front row, lost in the woods and protected by tick-infested wilderness. Half taken by the grasses, not much of it still survived and I had to excavate very delicately, lest it fall apart as I untangled it from the earth. It had clearly been there quite some time; time enough for the grasses to grow through it and for its integrity to be more about my wishful thinking than its cells.

Even with the most careful untangling, some of it remains still between the rocks, waiting for ghosts of actors past to play their tragedy.

Snakeskin speaks:

> *I am the outer skin of a snake who grew out of me. So much is obvious isn't it? I like rubbing myself against the hot stones of the theatre. Nobody usually comes here, so I can do my host-shedding where I can be undisturbed. You try*

shedding anything so restricting, so painful, so stultifying for too big a being when people are watching. Such things are done in darkness, privately. I do not choose to be observed when being peeled off. Yet the act itself has an energy, an anima, that tells me what to tell the snake to do. Plus, I like to give such important rituals all my energy and I get seriously annoyed if I feel my host is vulnerable.

So, you found the skin? Useless now to the snake and I was happily returning to the web of life. Half-taken by the land already? Of course. What snake grows out of and no longer needs is matter for what comes next. This skin becomes fodder for those beetles and crickets; even another snake perhaps. The grasses take energy from this skin in smaller-than-bite-size bits. Leachate, runoff, back to the Earth I go.

Just like an identity you once had and you held so true to. It ***was*** *part of you. No, it was you. Then you grow and you need to shed it. Quite the process, isn't it? The scratching, itching, releasing scale by scale, how smooth and new and* **you**, *you are underneath.*

And what of the old idea? Discarded and vanished? Oh no, not in this universe, where the natural laws say nothing is lost, merely transmuted and reused. Your old identity goes into something new, someone else picks it up somehow, as ideas they feel are for them; bright and shiny and perfect, until they too grow out of them and in turn they discard your old skin, that has become their own. And so it goes on. And all those who came before you too. You are someone else's old skin; old ways of being who came before. Transmuted energy, see?

Which is why, by the way, it's good to be patient with those who teach and shed and grow and change. They have given you their old skins too.

This old skin was once some snake else's old skin. In a different body.

……..

When the clamorous voices of our fellow Earthlings become the background hum of our lives, then we have stepped into ecotherapy spiral three: mysticism, deep, raw connection. The Rupture[3] has occurred and we have walked through the veil, into spiral three.

……..

It is very important to spiral back for resilience, for grounding and to ensure we are fully embodying our connection. None of the spirals are more important or above the others.

Spiral one: Healing of the self, connecting to self, to one's own path of healing.

Spiral two: healing of the false human/nature duality, stepping beyond dichotomy and dualistic thinking into realising on an embodied level that what happens to the other happens to the self.

Spiral three: stepping through the rupture, into service for all, human and non-human communities where the soul's call is one with the wisdom of the Earth; the quiet call, asking for us to step into service for the Earth and the cosmos. Continual spiralling brings embodiment of the lessons from the spirals of initiation we have been through, over and over. We are never finished.

The Land asked me about the magpies. I realise that all that we are faced with hasn't changed, it's all still as it was. Yet, I have become us, become we, become they. Only they know the true grief upon my shoulders. It is almost as if it's too enormous to be shared in the human world. I walked barefoot, I felt the Earth healing me; the snakeskin spoke and told me to let go, this is the work, and it goes forever on.[4] This is the spiral, embodied.

Photos by Harriet Sams

Harriet Sams is an ecotherapist, tutor and adult education teacher, a mentor and animist guide, and heritage educator, and is currently researching the phenomenon of archaeotherapy for her PhD through Bournemouth University. She can be found at: https://nwyfre-earth.co

3. 'The Rupture' is described by Jerome Bernstein in: Bernstein, J. (2005). *Living in the borderland: the evolution of consciousness and the challenge of healing trauma*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

4. The snakeskin can no longer be found, in that form at least.

Being decentred

By Rembrandt Zegers

This is a short exploration of decentring the human and my own experience of becoming 'decentred'. I have not thought about this much before, probably because I am used to other words like 'related' or 'system'. I was brought up in the era of cybernetics, organisational learning and the science of ecology, all slowly but steadily moving to front stage. However, when I call this reflection being decentred, I try to express something beyond what my abstract brain can grasp; I don't think it is possible to actively think myself 'decentred'. This exploration is more about my lived experience over time and my questioning of this experience.

Beginnings

I came upon systems thinking when studying biology and, later, when I was involved in environmental education in the late '80s and early '90s Through my studies, I was at ease with observations and analyses, such as Rachel Carson's *Silent spring*.[1] I learned about chemicals, how they work and what they can do to plants and creatures. But I could not understand why some people were spreading poison and why we allowed this to happen in society. Were 'they' (the people responsible, the authorities or other people) not seeing the wider impact on nature the way Carson did? I was part of this society, so was I responsible? Reading about politics made me understand how destroying nature can be due to financial motives, and how we are all part of political ideology and systems through our culture. I started to feel responsible, and that I was a part of this system but how exactly wasn't clear to me. Also, I had no clue how to change this, or how change could happen. Understanding these critical ideas did not immediately help me act differently in the world or influence the world.

Something shifted when I read Gary Zukav, Fritjof Capra and Gregory Bateson, who all commented on Western culture from understandings of an intertwined reality with the natural world. However, as with the political theories, their books did not immediately help me with application. I could not find ways to make such theories work for me (or to make my own versions).

Change management

The first time I noticed and became part of the practical consequences of a change of worldviews was when I switched jobs from a project subsidised by the Ministry of Environment to one funded by the Ministry of Agriculture. When it came to 'the environment' the Ministry of Environment seemed only interested in dead stuff (pollution levels), while the Ministry of Agriculture was more interested in living creatures and their behaviours (although mainly to boost production of food, especially meat). This startling contrast highlighted different worldviews. Both ministries claiming to safeguard living conditions, but operated as if within different worlds. Later, working in organisational consulting, I joined more dots (personal, group, organisational, social), as I encountered issues and conundrums that managers struggled with not knowing how to solve. Working under the heading of 'change management', one of the first things I noticed was that organisations were getting

Artwork, 4-metres, 2021, by Helen Elizabeth. "It was, they were certain, a calling down of something upon the draining" ('Fen', Daisy Johnson)

stuck in a routine and then had to play 'catch up' because of a crisis. Such a crisis could start anywhere from any department. The main cause of a crisis – as I saw it – was almost always found in not acting as a system. I diagnosed some causes and offered models to help clients towards different understandings, like sociotechnical thinking, Peter Senge's Fifth Discipline (systems thinking) or Peter Checkland's Soft Systems methodology (complexity theory). However, helping people digest such ideas and to internalise them was a tough job. So, most of the time, fixing problems meant suggesting a different organisational design, allocation and distribution of tasks and responsibilities; a rather limited and mechanical 'system'. I felt that organisations in general were not able to act as systems, as they mostly followed orders. For example, consulting was always consulting to the people in power, who could choose to follow some advice while forcing change upon others. Power and the ability to make changes went hand in hand.

1. Carson, R. (1962). *Silent spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

2. Group relations conferences are experiences of deep learning about group dynamics in the here and now, while participating in a one-time organisation. It is an action research model, originally created by staff of the Tavistock Institute in the UK.

Group relations

Working in change management, I got involved with group relations conferences, from which I learned more than I can say.[2] Reflecting on experiences of group and institutional dynamics in the here and now with others is incredibly enlightening. Digesting lived experience is so different from the attempt to understand someone else's theory. I started to see relations (and influences) where I had not seen or expected them before. I also started to understand how I was part of a culture, and categories within cultures, and how others addressed me as part of these categories, while they themselves were embedded in other categories. With this, came my own awareness of the forces at work against my acquiring this awareness, which could make me lose this awareness again. I felt the pressure to 'stay in line' with authority and not risk exclusion from my group. Our culture works against an awareness of the felt unconscious, through its promotion of hierarchy and obedience to authority. It also forces task orientation and efficiency, as part of our economic thinking of progress. Within such a culture I can survive only if I add (financial) value to the organisation I work for and ultimately to the marketplace and economy.

From organisations to the organisation of society

Group relations awakened me to the unconscious. Firstly, it helped me to identify and experience assumptions at work, so that I could say that the unconscious is real, not some theoretical invention. Secondly, I experienced how it is possible to access the unconscious, without ever being able to grasp it fully, through paying attention to feelings, expressions and interactions other than reasoning or cognitive messages. Because of this, I felt more open and alert to other signs of communication. I started to register myself and people differently, and our interactions. This extended to non-human animals and the more-than-human world.

Artwork, 4-metres, 2021, by Helen Elizabeth

Meeting a bird while walking in the dunes brought me to another level of relating and being decentred. I was on a lunch break from a conference with humans, just wanting my mind and body to relax and recuperate. Then I saw this bird sitting slightly above the ground in fairly open bush. It noticed me, looked at me. It was as if I was seeing a bird for the first time. I felt I was not just observing another creature, but actually meeting it, 'person to person'. Getting fairly close, I expected it to fly away, but it didn't. I had a sense of the bird's agency, making its own 'decisions'. That experience awakened a kind of call to further explore and study non-human animals and the more-than-human world. It became ever clearer to me that non-human agency could and should be acknowledged. Not just because of ethical reasons, but because of the reality of relating. The reality of meaning-making being a relational activity now clearly started off with my senses.

As a consequence of my 'meeting a bird', I started doing research, interviewing people about their relating to nature. I was amazed how many other people had similar experiences. I was also amazed to hear how often people kept their experiences to themselves – often out of anxiety about others not taking them seriously. What struck me looking into these questions was how science has informed the organisation of society in a way that makes it difficult to experience the workings and reality of being related, being a system, being decentred. Over the years, my quest (as it sometimes felt) shifted from, "What is wrong with me that I cannot understand my own culture?", to "Why (and how) is my own culture preventing my understanding?" One answer I found was that natural philosophy separated from social research over the last few centuries, splitting into separate areas like psychology, sociology, anthropology etc., while natural science split into physics, chemistry, biology.

Nevertheless, a reverse movement is gaining traction today. Instead of always zooming in on the smallest detail, we are now learning to zoom out. There is also a growing interest in the insights that can be discovered by looking at the whole and its relations. We can see this in disciplines that create new names for themselves, such as with the prefix 'eco' (ecopsychology, eco-philosophy etc.). We see it in multi or transdisciplinary teams, and in the realisation that knowledge is found and held within relations, especially our relational embeddedness within nature.

Relating to non-human animals and the more-than-human world

Phenomenology is a way of thinking that has become very close to my heart, because it emphasises phenomena and experiencing phenomena as openly and non-judgmentally as possible. I am also more and more drawn towards Indigenous cultures as sources of

3. It is in Hangzhou, where Tianducheng is a small suburb modelled on Paris. See: https://www.hoxtonminipress.com/collections/books/products/paris-china – There are versions of the Eiffel Tower elsewhere in China too. See: https://www.wonders-of-the-world.net/Eiffel-Tower/Repliques/Replicas-of-the-Eiffel-tower-in-China.php

4. Ironically, the original Eiffel Tower is also man made.

knowing and practices of relating to others and the land. I find a remarkable kinship between phenomenology and Indigenous practice of being in the world. But, I realise, at the same time, they are very different. Phenomenology occupies a niche in the world of philosophy and has (a small) role in social science, while Indigenous cultures are lived every day. Phenomenology is small in scale, but has gained status in Western thinking, while Indigenous cultures are pushed to the margins and threatened in large parts of the world to this very day. This situation negatively impacts people, ecosystems and cultures, and the habitats of non-human animals. I understand colonising to be as much of a material process (taking control over resources that are not ours) as it is psychological (acting from a sense of entitlement and erasing other people's cultures).

Alongside this, we are rapidly inventing virtual and artificial cultures that push us even further away from directly experiencing our relations with each other, non-human animals and the more-than-human world. This happens largely in IT, but also in everyday life. One example of moving away from direct experience that I came across the other day is a replica of the Eiffel Tower in China.[3] I wondered what is an Eiffel Tower without the French, or the rest of the city of Paris? Is this an example of confusing an experience of the real thing through seeing it, even while at the same time knowing it is not the real thing?[4] As if experience can be reduced to thinking, or as if experience can be mimicked. What worries me enormously is that we plunder the earth, reshape it to be as compliant as it possibly can be while at the same time faking 'wild' experience, as if this can replace the process of meaning making, inherent in life and finding one's way.

How do I now go about lived experience and being 'decentred'?

Saying, "I belong to the sky through the birds, to the water through the fish, to the soil through the worms", now means something to me. I also belong to my family, place, communities, cultures and history. Through my work, I have developed experience and skills so I can sustain myself. But I am not independent, I am totally interdependent and, most of the time, dependent. I can sense and experience how modern (Western) culture struggles with the realities of being interdependent, while being dependent is considered really problematic. If you are dependent, you are doing something wrong because you are seen as not having autonomy, not being an individual. One of the most important points of what it means to be decentred is to be aware of relatedness, and to be aware of being 'a system' and being part of systems. Maybe becoming decentred is an experience of becoming 'multiple'. Maybe it is about abandoning a conditioned idea of individuality as

Artwork, 4-metres, 2021, by Helen Elizabeth

a solid, fixed person who achieves maturity through being certain of 'who one is'. Maybe this is to be replaced by the awareness of the possibility of an ever-expanding relatedness. I am multi-layered. I am in multiple relations. My existence is not solely 'in the market place', it is in the world at large. Progress is no longer about money in the bank; instead it is relative and carries an awareness of being embedded in a relational world. I feel a strange paradox of not losing myself, as long as I understand I am decentred, a system, part of systems. For me, this comes with a call to serve relatedness, to serve the process of 'decentring'.

Epilogue

Over the last 100 years or so, an anthropocentric self has developed in psychotherapy. Probably it developed from much older roots. Even Searles (1960),[5] who is generally seen as the first psychoanalyst brave enough to contest the notions of fixed individuality, kept to the line of anthropocentrism.[6] And, in my opinion, ecopsychology has not been able to make this full turn either.

The turn from studying a system to the lived experience of decentring self and 'being a system' is an existential turn; a turn to a new understanding of being that could lead to regenerating cultures. Above all, and most importantly, this is a turn which realises that humans are not the only agents on the planet, but instead agency is a multi-faceted phenomenon that is part of, and shows itself as part of, all relations between all creatures and their living environment.

Rembrandt Zegers PhD is a researcher of nature relations, organisational consultant and Gestalt psychologist. His current consultancy projects aim to innovate relating to nature in business. He introduced climate psychology into the Netherlands, and is also the trustee and mentor of someone with autism. Rembrandt lives in the Netherlands.

5. Searles, H. (1960). *The nonhuman environment in normal development and in schizophrenia*. New York: International Universities Press.

6. In fact, Searles argued that episodes of being one with nature can be seen to occur in patients suffering from psychoses and schizophrenia. Searles also stated that the natural sciences provide knowledge about nature. The psychologically healthily developed person only has to take notice of those findings. He seemed to point at the natural sciences as the authority when it comes to knowing about nature.

How to contribute to Issue 3 of *Explorations in Climate Psychology Journal*

By the Editorial Team

The theme of the next issue will be 'Staying with the trouble' and we welcome contributions in this area. When the implications of the climate emergency suddenly become emotionally real, how can we stay with the difficult feelings aroused without collapsing into despair or being overwhelmed by panic? This is both an individual and social issue.

We invite contributions in the following areas:

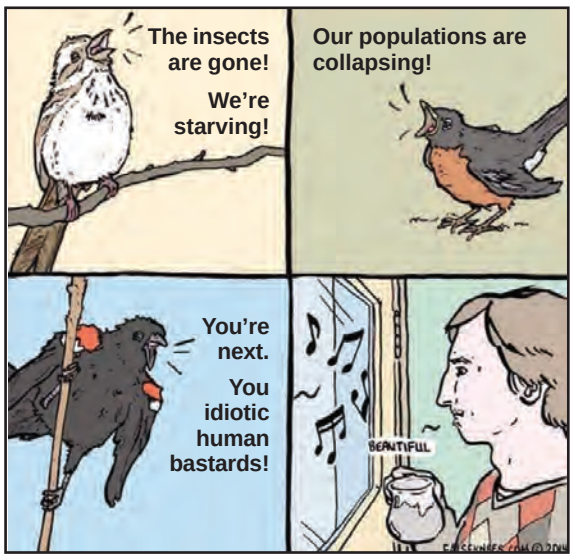
- analytical pieces which focus on the emotions involved and how they might be managed;
- experiences of interventions which have proved effective;
- personal accounts of your encounters with the troubling feelings aroused by climate change, and how you have worked through them;
- reviews of novels, poems, films etc., which you feel have helped you to come to terms with the current and potential future reality.

We will always be open to reviewing papers that do not fit the theme particularly if they respond to contemporary developments.

Please email your contributions, by 10 July 2022, to: ejournal@climatepsychologyalliance.org

Please expect a few rounds of feedback from the Editorial Team once you have submitted. We cannot guarantee publication, and contributions that are accepted for publication may be held over for a future issue if they fit better with one of our future themes.

Lost in bird song translation, submitted by Adrian Tait



Decentring practice

By Chris Robertson

Learning new practices requires unlearning old ones. It is like breathing out to create space for breathing in. The practices in question here are those that have emphasised the centrality of the inner at the expense of the outer. A classic example is making interpretations about a patient's ecological concerns, such as described by Jerome Bernstein[1] when he attempted to redirect sensitivity with a cow's suffering to family relations. The patient roared back at him, "It's the cows, stupid!" Bernstein went on to explore the nature of such sensitivity to animal suffering, not as belonging to family pathology but as an emergent or recovering human capacity lost in the Western rush to progress.

Susan Kassouf's recent paper 'Thinking catastrophic thoughts',[2] explores some of the challenges to psychoanalysis becoming more permeable to the more-than-human environment. She also invites new ways of thinking, not caught in the inner/outer binary. Such non-binary ways of thinking are extensively discussed in the recently published book, *Climate psychology: a matter of life and death*.[3] These relational and inter-dependent ways of thought are essential to decentring the anthropic delusion of some humans, who consider themselves to be at the centre of everything.

The psychology of modernity, which has promoted a notion of ego control that purports to free us from the untamed chaos of a primitive unconscious, has left us with a hyper-individualised and impoverished environment. Decentring offers the possibility of acknowledging realities and other beings beyond our present capacity to comprehend.

The necessary work of deconstructing the epistemological foundations of modernist world views that permitted exploitation and plunder, are deeply threatening – white fragility is not the half of it. In focusing on individual treatment, psychotherapy is complicit in compounding a neoliberal emphasis on individual success that denies dependence on the 'others' – both human and more-than-human.

The social and cultural unravelling, catalysed by the Covid-19 virus, may be part of this breaking open of neoliberal control but the cell of the self-important ego is so entangled with anthropomorphic structures that deconstructing its empire to allow a decentring requires radical thought and engagement. In *Climate psychology,* Sally Weintrobe writes:

> *The dominant culture of uncare many now live within is meticulous in the attention it pays to keeping hidden evidence of damage and of violence that would trouble citizens morally. It promotes a fake view of the world that makes no demands on people to change.*[4]

Release from this entitled world would be akin to Prospero, in Shakespeare's Tempest, breaking his wand and forsaking the power and control he exercised through his magic.

As well as releasing ourselves from controlling practices, psychotherapists can open to new practices that give permission for their clients to bring to therapy their ecological distress, their catastrophic anxieties about the state of the world, their grief for the terrible losses in the sixth great extinction. This 'giving permission' is a field affect that emerges from the quality of the relationship, a transduction that communicates trust and empathy in the process however painful.

Early (2019) workshops of 'Through the Door'[5] included psychotherapists who, although aware of the climate crisis, reported that their patients never brought up concerns. What might be operating in the unconscious dynamic that does not give permission for this sensitive topic? Is it a threshold that is too frightening or shameful? This may not be personal or interpersonal. It may be a social taboo that has permeated into the consulting room, bringing with it shameful wounds.

Decentring brings the eco-social into the psychological. The collective shock at climate disasters and social breakdowns cannot be left outside the consulting room. As Matthew Adams spells out in 'Heartbreaking losses in real places',[6] the devastation of actual persons, animal species and places is current now. How can psychotherapists bear to be with what seems unbearable? How can we follow the dictum of staying with the trouble when it seems overwhelming?

The simple answer is 'with difficulty' and with wider support that holds us as we engage the collective distress that needs a place to be felt and thought. In supervision, many psychotherapists report feeling helpless as if that were an incapacity. Bayo Akomolafe[7] speaks of 'generative incapacity' to indicate rekindling a relating that comes with disruption from the more-than-human. These are practices of humility learnt through failure and being

1. Bernstein, J. (2005). *Living in the borderland: the evolution of consciousness and the challenge of healing trauma.* Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

2. Kassouff, S. (2022). Thinking catastrophic thoughts: a traumatised sensibility on a hotter planet. *American Journal of Psychoanlysis*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/s11231-022-09340-3 [Accessed 30 March 2022]

3. Hollway, W., Hoggett, P., Robertson, C., and Weintrobe, S. (2022). *Climate psychology: a matter of life and death*. London: Phoenix Publishing House.

4. Ibid, Ch.5, p.103.

5. https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/events/489-through-the-door-workshop-for-practitioners

6. Adams, M. (2020). Heartbreaking losses in real places: losing and finding solace in the Anthropocene. *Anthropocene psychology: being human in a more-than-human world*, Ch.5. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge. Also available as an eBook: Taylor & Francis Group.

7. Seminar from 'We will dance with mountains' in 2020. For seminar details, go to: https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/offerings

wounded. Becoming confused and feeling helpless in the face of what can feel like the end of the world are the preconditions of decentred practice. While being failures of 'normal' practice, they represent spaces where the 'normal' has broken open. They come with what James Hillman called, 'a consciousness breaking through dismemberment'.[8]

The deep well of grief

Beauty already trampled on; desolation

a transient presence before it is lost

Too much to hold, too much to digest, too much to bear

Can I release? Let go of the weight, allow gravity to carry it?

In the first *Explorations* journal, Sally Gillespie asked, "How can we find healing vessels and healing therapies from within such a flawed, wounded and traumatised culture?" My response is that it is through our woundedness and flaws, as opposed to expertise, that we may find a way. It requires a change of heart and a leap into the unknown, so beautifully illustrated by Yves Klein's image opposite.

Remorse, that painful acknowledgement of having wronged another, can act as a catalyst to compassionate action and the capacity to bear the pain. This includes making individual and collective amends as in the truth and reconciliation commissions. Integrating these atonements into an eco-psycho-social perspective frames the work of acknowledging personal and collective failures as part of reparative process.

Matters of heart are what connects persons to what is vital and moving for them (like metaphorically, their blood). Often the kernel, the nub, of a deeply personal issue puts us in touch with an elemental power, missing if we cling to the familiar. In the Heart workshops offered by the CPA early in the onset of Covid-19, we explored this edge; a counter-cultural practice to move away from emphasis on individual thought and action. We asked whose tears are these? Whose troubles are these?

In a dream I sense a dark stain.

I can not seem to wash it away even though my salt tears flow, endlessly.

Then the tide turns.

The sea waters join with my tears, accompanying them.

Still the stain remains.

I notice my feet are cut on the rough rocks.

My blood oozes out through the cuts, mixing with the salt water.

A healing starts. The stain becomes crimson.

Reparative acts can carry powerful meaning whether in dreams, through practical cleaning up of a river or creating a memorial for lost species. This is where the inner and outer meet in reciprocal connection. I don't talk of inter-connections. It operates through me.

Photo by Yves Klein

Chris Robertson has been a psychotherapist since 1978. He is the ex-Chair of CPA and co-founder of Re-Vision, a psychotherapy training with soulful perspective. He is co-author of *Climate psychology: a matter of life and death* (2022) and 'Culture crisis: a loss of soul' in Mathers, D. (ed.) (2020). *Depth psychology and climate change*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge. Find Chris at: https://www.culture-crisis.net

8. Hillmann, J. (2006). Puer Wounds and Ulysses' Scarr. *Senex and Puer, Uniform Edition*, Vol. 3. Washington D.C.:Spring Publications.

Tree meditations

By Jenni Silverstein

Tree grounding

Sit with your back against a tree if you are able. Or, sit in a chair as close to the base of a tree as you can comfortably get

Slow your breathing to your comfort level, breathe into your belly, allow your exhale to be longer than your inhale

Bring your attention to the tree behind you. Notice the details of its size and structure

Notice what you feel about its presence

Imagine you have roots that grow out of the bottom of your feet into the ground

With each exhale they grow deeper and stronger

Imagine your roots entwining with those of the tree

As you breathe in, pull grounding energy through your roots up into your feet

Just as the tree pulls nutrients up from the soil

As you breathe in, imagine this grounding energy moving up through your body, filling your legs, torso, chest, arms, and face, until it reaches the top of your head

Just as the tree moves the nutrients it needs into every leaf

Bring your attention back to the tree

Enjoy its presence

Composting challenging emotions

Sit with your back against a tree if you are able. Or, sit in a chair as close to the base of a tree as you can comfortably get

Slow your breathing to your comfort level, breathe into your belly, allow your exhale to be longer than your inhale

Bring your attention to the tree behind you. Notice the details of its size and structure

Notice what you feel about its presence

Imagine you have roots that grow out of the bottom of your feet into the ground. With each exhale they grow deeper and stronger

Imagine your roots entwining with those of the tree

As you breathe out, imagine that you are sending your grief/fear/anger/pain into the tree

You can picture the feelings flowing out from behind your heart

Imagine the tree catching your emotions and sending them down

Releasing them into the ground to be composted, just as waste is composted into nutrients within Mama Earth

Imagine the tree drawing those newly made nutrients up from the ground

As you inhale, breathe what the tree offers back into your heart

Repeat as long as necessary

About other contributors

Joanna Gilar is a Sussex-based storyteller and writer, with a PhD in fairy tales and ecology from the University of Chichester. She currently works as a community storyteller, building projects for families and young people that strengthen communities via stories. She is passionate about inspiring young – and old – to discover the infinite wonder of the ordinary world. She is editor of *The world treasury of fairy tales and folklore* (Wellfleet Press, 2016), and founder of Story Commons (https://www.wildstorycommons.org).

Asli Sonceley is a mother, founder and artist based in Los Angeles. She investigates the links between mental health and environmental health through artistic compulsions and research in social sciences. She recently presented her reflections on "the big importance of small influence" at CPA's Thinking Space. She is a part of the CPA Bipoc group. She is particularly interested in climate psychology resources for parents. Find Asli at: https://www.aslisonceley.com

Rachel Cakebread is a sustainability consultant based in London. She facilitates Climate Cafés through the CPA and is interested in creating shared spaces to explore and acknowledge our impact on the world around us. She writes poetry to connect to her feelings about climate change and her relationship with the more-than-human world.

Helen Elizabeth (artists' name) / **Helen Mann** is a clinical psychologist and artist. Find her at: www.helenelizabeth.uk and: www.instagram.com/hm.encounters

Jenni Silverstein is a climate aware therapist and licensed clinical social worker, with over 20 years' experience in supporting young children and their parents, and pregnant and postpartum women. She lives in Sonoma County and works with clients outdoors as much as possible. Find Jenni at: https://www.jennisilverstein.com

FACING DIFFICULT TRUTHS

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Explorations in Climate Psychology Journal

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