

The Eco-Trauma and Eco-Recovery of Being



JULIA ZANES

*And did you get what you wanted from this life even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the Earth.*

—RAYMOND CARVER

TINA AMOROK

TO BE CONSCIOUSLY IMMERSED in our ecological and cosmological identity and relationships imparts a feeling of profound intimacy. We can feel this interconnected sanctity of life through silent immersion, receptivity, and heartfelt presence. This is the realm of *eco-Being*. When we become attuned to the many voices of the natural world, we realize not only that we are in the presence of timeless interspecies stories of symbiosis and evolution but also that we exist because of this ecological and cosmological intimacy. This communion instills a transformative reverence for life. The perception, identity, and relationships that are revealed and forged within the realm of *eco-Being* inspire cosmologies, worldviews, creative works, and lives that hold a vision for a peaceful and ecologically sustainable existence for all beings. This felt knowing and vision become our central reference, our sacred guide into the future.

The experience of interconnectedness contains paradox, for we sense not just the profound beauty of life but also the pandemic of human violence and the existential anxiety that it causes. The destructive presence of nuclear and chemical weapons, for example, exists both in the military arsenals of governments *and* in the realm of interconnectedness, where our fear of annihilation and the felt sense of the suffering of others—including the Earth itself—are transmitted just as clearly as the joy of *Being*. We defend ourselves from this fearsome side of interconnectedness through separation ideologies and practices (war, religious fanaticism, racism, and sexism), psychological defense mechanisms (denial, dissociation, psychic numbing), and an array of debilitating behaviors and responses that bear the signature of trauma, ranging from depression, anxiety, and addictive lifestyles to violence toward self, others, and nature.

This traumatic loss of intimacy with the Earth and the cosmos creates a *deficit* in the realm of *eco-Being* and is a

core cause of human-upon-nature and human-upon-human violence. This is the *eco-trauma* of *Being* and the cyclic nature of trauma and violence. Healing this deficit through the *recovery of eco-Being* is an essential process in the transformation of individual and collective human consciousness. Not perceiving the sacred presence of nature and not experiencing oneself as interconnected with life is arguably the greatest threat facing the Earth today.

NURTURING THE NATURAL WITHIN

Eco-Being is both a cosmological and an experiential realm. It is our fundamental nature, something that we can tangibly sense through the direct experience of the here and now in presence and place. Arnie Naess, the father of “deep ecology,” taught that self-realization depends on a process of widening and deepening self-identification with all of life. Consciously being both in and of the world reveals the radiant sacred presence animating all things.

The experience of numinosity and kinship with *everything* is meant to be a part of our everyday lives. Humans are born with an animistic sense of the world, an ability to perceive the soul in nature. Such an enchanted perspective provides the foundation for healthy human development. But when their innate animism isn’t nurtured, children’s creative impulse to manifest from a sense of wonder is compromised, and over time can be systematically dismantled.

Many living-systems scientists hold an animistic worldview. It is not infantile cognitive regression or primitive thinking; rather, it is the same perennial wisdom that is at the heart of nature-based cosmologies and that is finding its way into the modern scientific view. Ecological worldviews effectively peel back the layers of modern civilization’s alienation from nature and animals and from the intimate facts of both our interdependence and our natural impulse toward interspecies reverence and communion. ➔

It is vitally important that we preserve the eco-Being within our children; this helps prepare their psyches to cope with and creatively solve the wounds to soul and land they inevitably inherit. It is also important that we attend to the recovery of eco-Being in adults. Trauma is spread and healed in relationships, so as children heal, they invariably heal the wounds of their elders—and vice versa. Trauma literature tells us that it takes several generations to heal, and

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while trauma is personal, it also has sociocultural and historical dimensions.

THE ORIGINAL TRAUMA AND ITS AFTERMATH

For the most part, the human species has lived peacefully for 98 percent of our evolutionary time on Earth. Archaeological evidence suggests that until a few thousand years ago, we lived in nature-based cultures that revered life. Archaic *Homo sapiens* arose 300,000 years ago and lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers in tribal groups until the Neolithic Period. Neolithic villages arose 12,000 years ago along with the domestication of plants and animals that gave rise to agriculture. Many scholars believe that life-affirming practices, equality between men and women, and the absence of warfare were also common before and during the Neolithic period. They argue that the Indo-European and Semitic invasions beginning 6,000 years ago mark the onset of the dominator warrior cults of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. These invaders brought social and ecological domination and the collapse of matrilineal civilizations to Old Europe and the Middle East (Taylor, 2005). The harmful effects of this aberrant human violence represent the original trauma, the eco-trauma of Being.

Both historically and today the moderate incidents of violence found in nature-based cultures stand in sharp contrast to estimates that in the last two centuries 191 million people have died in wars and another 262 million

have been killed through “democide”—the killing by government (see *Death by Government* by R. J. Rummel; Transaction, 1994). Such distorted models of governance are the major sources of global violence, oppression, and consequent trauma in the world today.

In his 2006 book *Healing the Soul Wound* (Teachers College Press, 2006), Native American psychologist Eduardo Duran explains that for Native American people, the source and sustenance of their body, mind, and soul come from the Earth. Their soul wound is caused by violent removal from their land and embedded way of life by colonial invasion and occupation. This wound is in a state of constant retraumatization with the continual devastation of the land and their native way of being, now made more complex by domestic and intratribal violence, poverty, and disease.

When humans are forcibly torn from their family, culture, and land, a violent disruption to and deficit in the realm of Being—individually, collectively, ecologically, and spiritually—are created. This holds true whether the violence occurred 6,000 years ago or 6 months ago. When we group ourselves according to nations and tribes, it seems easier to separate the perpetrators from the victims and to chart the historical cycles of trauma and violence. But on the level of Being, such divisions become obscured because we are all descendants of peoples who at different times were perpetrators or survivors of these traumas. These historical traumas and their psychic legacies are passed on intergenerationally through families, institutions, societies, cultures, and nations.

Healing such intergenerational wounds ultimately requires truth and reconciliation, and the restoration and reparation of soul and land. This has not been done in most places on Earth that have been repeatedly ravaged by human violence. Native American history, cosmology, and psychology play a crucial role in developing both an understanding and a healing of the intergenerational cycles of violence, oppression, and trauma that have afflicted North American culture and society.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) made posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) a diagnostic category in 1980 with the publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III*. This is when the effects of trauma upon veterans of war were brought into the mainstream culture, along with other “direct traumas”

such as sexual and domestic violence. But the APA model needs to be revised to include many other traumatic experiences. Until the reconceptualization of trauma is mainstreamed in psychology, trauma will continue to be misunderstood and unattended to in our culture. As clinician Martin deVries concluded, when a culture does not recognize trauma, that trauma goes unhealed and becomes chronic. This creates a traumatic worldwide “field site that sadly appears to be ever growing and endless” (deVries, 1996).

Key to the current reconceptualizing of trauma are psychological theories drawn from intergenerational trauma, feminist psychology, transpersonal psychology, and eco-psychology. Research on the intergenerational transmission of trauma asserts that trauma is passed on from generation to generation through a “deficit in the experiential mode of the realm of being” (Felsen, 1998). Feminist psychologists argue that trauma theories should include indirect and insidious traumata and be contextualized historically, sociopolitically, and developmentally. Transpersonal psychologists propose that “holes of nonbeing” are created from human relationships that objectify the being—the very existence—of another, providing inadequate empathic “unifying centers” for healthy human development (Firman and Gila, 1997). In her book *My Name Is Chellis and I’m in Recovery from Western Civilization* (Shambhala, 1994), ecopsychologist Chellis Glendinning writes: “Because we are creatures who were born to live in vital participation with the natural world, the violation of this participation forms the basis of our original trauma.” By incorporating these ideas into the cosmological context of eco-Being, we not only expand our understanding of the trauma and violence that has covered the Earth but also greatly deepen our capacity for it—and our— healing and recovery.

Recognizing the eco-trauma of Being as the primal wound inherent in all peoples, we are able to hold a compassionate and healing perspective. Through the lens of trauma, we can understand how both the perpetrators and victims of violence suffer the same wounding. It is a malady we can recover from, but only through the empathic embrace of our perpetrations and wounds. We must acknowledge our violent histories, grieve our transgressions, make reparations, and begin the healing process for all.

THE PATH OF RECOVERY

Most Western psychological models and practices reflect our individualistic worldview and alienation from life. They are not ecologically grounded. To begin healing what is broken in ourselves and in our relations to the natural world, we need to see and feel what is within us and all around us. Unfortunately, because our sorrows and

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joys are so utterly close to us everyday, most of us have trouble acknowledging them, especially what is most painful to feel. Fortunately, there are many methods and techniques that offer healing through the eco-recovery of Being. Many share an essential structure that includes direct experience, shared experience, and social, ecological, and spiritual action. In particular, the longevity and effectiveness of cross-cultural rituals and healing practices are evidence that there is a logical process and flow to our cosmological soul recovery. These include vision quests, sweat lodges, and nature awareness schools, led by experienced guides, healers, shamans, and wise elders. However such healing is pursued, it is important to spend reverent time in nature to mend these ancient wounds.

The eco-recovery of Being also needs community containers for expressing the anguish one feels for the world and sharing that experience with others. Ecopsychological therapy, deep ecology work, and Joanna Macy’s “The Work that Reconnects” (www.joannamacy.net) are among several such approaches. Just as essential are creative actions that are life affirming, such as ecological restoration projects and animal, environmental, and social justice work. Lastly, the eco-recovery of Being must be grounded in insights that will help us navigate through the joyful and painful paradoxes felt within the realm of eco-Being. Compassion arises when we hold the tension between our love for life and our sorrow for its devastation. Holding paradox is the healing salve of our times; it makes what is broken and fragmented whole.

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A BOTH/AND EMBRACE

When we encounter atrocity and sorrow, we protect and defend against the despair we feel. Dissociation, splitting, denial, and psychic numbing are all ingenious ways we employ to survive in such a world, but these strategies have become a dangerous part of the problem. Our future well-being requires that we both embrace the great despair and celebrate the even more awe-filled reality of our Being. To connect to the pain of the world is akin to having empathy for one's victim and one's self. Although the path to healing is in part a painful journey, it is through this process that we restore the deficit in our ecological souls. The realm of eco-Being is where we most hurt, do harm, and need to heal. We long to live in harmony with what is, to belong and feel beloved upon the Earth. This is our natural state. We can return to the primal matrix of Being, for in truth we never left it. 🌍

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