

The Ecological Self

John Seed

John Seed is a long-time, deep ecology movement activist who also conducts council of all beings workshops. He has been working for the protection of rainforests for 25 years. He delivered a keynote address entitled “Our Larger Community: All Species of the Cenozoic Era” at EarthSpirit Rising: A Conference on Ecology, Spirituality and Community at Xavier University, in Cincinnati, Ohio on July 8–10 2005, <http://earthspiritrising.org>. A slightly different version of this article was published in *EarthLight*, in April 2005. For those who want to know more about the ceremonies and workshops John Seed does, his email address is: Johnseed1@ozemail.com.au. He would love to hear from you.

Introduction

In the 1970s, when Jerry Brown was Governor of California, the eco-poet Gary Snyder was working in his administration. One day Gov. Brown felt exasperated. He said to Snyder: “Gary, why is it that, whatever the issue, you are always going against the flow?”

Gary replied: “Jerry, what you call ‘the flow’ is just a 16,000 year eddy; I’m going with the *actual* flow!”

The deep, long-range ecology movement is based on a feeling for nature that sees the environmental crisis as a symptom of a psychological or spiritual ailment that afflicts modern humanity in technological societies.

We moderns are enveloped by an illusion of separation from nature, made more extreme by anthropocentrism or human first centredness.

I

Supporters of the deep, long-range ecology movement critique the idea that we are the crown of creation, and the measure of all beings. We tend to think that the world is a pyramid with humanity rightly on top: that nature is merely a resource and that it has only instrumental value. To maintain such a position, we have to ignore our own deeper feelings that our poets remind us of.

The great California poet Robinson Jeffers was one of the ancestors of the deep ecology movement who reminds us of our connections with the natural world.

As a young man, in the 1920s, he wrote this prophetic poem for his two infant sons.

Shine, Perishing Republic

While this America settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily
thickening to Empire,
And protest, just a bubble in the molten mass, pops and sighs
out, and the mass hardens,

I sadly smiling remember that the flower fades to make fruit, the
fruit rots to make earth.
Out of the mother; and through the spring exultances, ripeness
and decadence; and home to the mother.

You making haste, haste on decay: not blameworthy; life is good,
be it stubbornly long or suddenly
A mortal splendor: meteors are not needed less than mountains:
shine perishing republic.

But for my children, I would have them keep their distance from
the thickening center: corruption
Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the monster's
feet there are left the mountains.

And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man, a clever
servant, insufferable master.
There is the trap that catches noblest spirits, that caught –
they say – God, when he walked on earth.¹

A popular formulation of the sensibilities of the deep, long-range ecology movement is found in *Ishmael* and other books by Daniel Quinn.

In a recent essay, “The New Renaissance,”² Quinn calls on us to heed this “concise expression of the basic message of all my books.” He says that anthropocentrism is “the most dangerous idea in existence” because it necessitates mass extinction, including our own. He writes:

And even more than being the most dangerous idea in existence, it's the most dangerous thing in existence—more dangerous than all our nuclear armaments, more dangerous than biological warfare, more dangerous than all the pollutants we pump into the air, the water, and the land. All the same, it sounds pretty harmless. You can hear it and say, “Uh huh, yeah, so?” It's pretty simple too. Here it is: *Humans belong to an order of being that is separate from the rest of the living community.* There's us and then there's nature. There's humans and then there's the human environment.

The term *deep ecology movement* was coined in the 1972 by Arne Naess, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Oslo University. He and other theorists have traced the historical roots of anthropocentrism.³ Naess and others offer a more wide ranging critique. Naess also coined the term *ecosophy* for any lifestyle and practice which focuses on ecological values and harmony with the natural world. The author Lynn White Jr. focuses particularly on the role of Judeo-Christianity.⁴ In this religion, according to White, we live in a world where only humans were created in the image of God, only humans have a soul and, prophetically:

the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth on the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands they are delivered.⁵

Given that there are such deep anthropocentric roots in our culture and psyche, it is little wonder that a change of *concepts* is not by itself sufficient to reorient ourselves, to align ourselves back with the flow of the natural world.

As Arne Naess has pointed out, ecological ideas are not enough, we need an ecological identity an *ecosophic self*.

Ideas only engage one part of our mind in cognition. We also need ecological *feelings* and *actions* as well as ideas to nurture a maturing ecological identity in a place.

Poets have always known that in wild places too, we may expand into larger identities. Here is Jeffers again:

I entered the life of the brown forest,
And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of stone,
I felt the changes in the veins
In the throat of the mountain,
and, I was the stream,
Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking:
and I was the stars,
Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of his own summit;
and I was the darkness
Outside the stars, I included them. They were part of me.
I was mankind also, a moving lichen
On the cheek of the round stone . . . they have not made words for it . . .⁶

II

Arne Naess writes:

If reality is experienced by the ecological Self, our behaviour *naturally* and beautifully follows norms of strict environmental ethics. We certainly need to hear about our ethical shortcomings from time to time, but we change more easily through encouragement and a deepened perception of reality and our own *self*, that is, through a deepened realism. How that is to be brought about is too large a question for me to deal with here. But it will clearly be more a question of community therapy than community science: we must find and develop therapies which heal our relations with the widest community, that of all living beings.⁷

When I first read these words in 1986, I couldn't help but think of the work that Joanna Macy and I had initiated the year before. "The Council of All Beings" is a set of experiential deep ecology processes, ceremonies and rituals that help us to expand our identification in the way that Naess describes. "Community therapy to develop deep awareness of our ecological self" is a good way of thinking about this work.

A couple of years later I was privileged to witness a ceremony held in a Hopi village high on a mesa in the southwest of the United States. It was so like the Council of All Beings. The masks were more splendid,

of course, the drums more confident. And people assured me that they had continually celebrated thus for thousands of years.

Since then I have searched in vain for a single example of an indigenous culture, still connected to their traditions, which didn't have such ceremonies: regular rituals to testify that the human family is one strand in the larger web of life, to acknowledge all our relations.

This suggests that the tendency to disconnect from the natural world might not be just a modern phenomenon as I had assumed. The fact that indigenous people invariably practice such ceremonies, speaks of the human tendency to forget who we really are and wander off into socially constructed identities. Why else would we need to regularly and powerfully remind ourselves that we are part of the web of life?

Most peoples have always had cultural processes to counteract this tendency. So many solutions have been found that allow the human community to continue to cleave to the whole Earth community. This had been lost from our culture, suppressed by inquisitions and ignorance and now it re-emerges in a thousand ways.

Even more than “community therapy,” I think that “cultural reclamation” encapsulates this work that reconnects.

Deep ecological experiential processes for connecting with our ecological selves, that have been developed and extensively tested over the last 20 years, are described in detail elsewhere.⁸

We work with three major processes:

1. Despair and Empowerment or work with feelings.
2. Deep Time, Evolutionary Remembering, The Cosmic Walk.
3. The Council of All Beings.
 - Despair and Empowerment or work with feelings. We circle together with our people as of old and mourn the loss of species and landscapes,
 - Deep Time, Evolutionary Remembering, The Cosmic Walk. remember our billion-year journey
 - The Council of All Beings, and empathize with the myriad creatures.

We circle together with our people as of old and mourn the loss of species and landscapes, remember our billion-year journey, and empathize with the myriad creatures. Whenever we do so, we have found that a palpable and expanded ecological identity inevitably

emerges in participants along with a profound experience of community. However, these experiences are ephemeral.

Research by Eshana (Dr. Elizabeth Bragg) has shown⁹ that unless we find a way to regularly practice our deep ecology, the new and fragile consciousness fades back into the logic of the eddy, and we remain trapped inside a skin encapsulated ego floating helplessly towards the abyss.

The *ideas* of interconnectedness and participation may remain, but in the absence of the *experience* they are sterile.

As part of her PhD dissertation, Eshana developed new tools for measuring “ecological identity.” In Australia, North America and Russia she asked people to answer her questionnaires before a weekend deep ecology workshop, 48 hours later after the workshop, and six months later. She found statistically significant increases in participants’ “ecological identity” scores after the workshop, but, except for people who find ways to continue the practices and embody them somehow in their lives, this effect vanishes in six months.

These things are explored in community. We need to find or create a “sangha” of kindred spirits (as all spiritual traditions have recognized). We need to find opportunities to meet—on solstices, equinoxes, under the full moon, in deep ecology workshops or online—to build these vital support systems into our lives. In such ways, while swirling in the midst of the vast eddy, we may remain aligned to the flow.

Naess advocates a pluralism of ecosophies. The platform of the deep, long-range ecology movement contains statements¹⁰ that most people who consider themselves part of this movement can support, even though each person may have a unique and personal ecosophy.

This paper is a sketch of my own ecosophy.

I came to this understanding, this consciousness, initially through a profound epiphany that took place when I found myself taking part in the first direct action in defense of rainforests at Terania Creek, New South Wales, in August of 1979. As I wrote some years later in an essay titled “Beyond Anthropocentrism,”¹¹ for me this transformation of perspective came from my actions on behalf of Mother Earth.

“I am protecting the rainforest” develops into “I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking.” What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature.

In the early 1980s, reading Devall, Sessions, and Naess, I finally found a philosophical approach through which I could make sense of this experience.

Workshops

Workshop descriptions and John Seed & Ruth Rosenhek workshop schedules and essays can be found at www.rainforestinfo.org.au.

Joanna Macy's schedule and writings may be found at www.joannamacy.net.

Notes

¹ Tim Hunt, editor. 1988. *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, Vol. 1.

² See [http://ishmael.org/Education/Writings/The New Renaissance.shtml](http://ishmael.org/Education/Writings/The_New_Renaissance.shtml)

³ See the deep ecology section at www.rainforestinfo.org.au/

⁴ Lynn White Jr. 1967. The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis. *Science* 155: 1203–1207

⁵ Genesis 9:2

⁶ From Tim Hunt, editor. 1988. Signpost. *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, Vol. 1.

⁷ Arne Naess 1988. Self Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World. *Thinking Like a Mountain—Towards a Council of All Beings* by John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess, New Society Publishers.

⁸ See the deep ecology section at www.joannamacy.net/ or www.rainforestinfo.org.au.

⁹ PhD thesis by Eshana (AKA Elizabeth Bragg). For a summary of her findings see “Towards an Ecological Self” at www.rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-eco/Eshana.htm.

¹⁰ See Arne Naess. 2005. The Basics of Deep Ecology. *The Trumpeter* Vol. 21, No. 1.

¹¹ Reprinted in Bill Devall's book *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology*, Peregrine Smith Books, 1988.