

Following the Raven: The Paradoxical Path Toward a Depth Ecopsychology

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Abstract

Comparing two very different genres of writing, Richard Nelson's nature writing about his experiences among the Koyukon tribe in northern Alaska and Carl Jung's work on the primitive psyche, this article highlights the need for modern, Western people to recover an indigenous relationship with the natural world. Jung declares that one of the biggest tragedies of Western civilization is the loss of the numinous that has resulted in the dehumanizing of the natural world. Examining Jung's controversial use of the terms "primitive" and participation mystique, we discover that what modern man has considered to be a more "civilized" higher state of consciousness has been wrongly equated with ego-consciousness, thus resulting in a limited understanding of the unconscious psyche. This article points out that the way beyond the "cult of consciousnesses" is to attend to that which the rational mind does not understand: dreams, symptoms, and the presence of archetypes. By doing so, the Western heroic ego, along with its need to dominate and control nature, is dismantled, opening the door for a participatory relationship with both psyche and nature. Whereas Jung's work is highly theoretical, Richard Nelson's writing provides insight into the lived experience of these ideas. The aim here is not for Western people to appropriate that which belongs to native people but rather to learn that there is more mystery to the world than ego-consciousness is able to contain. This, says Jung, is the goal of individuation.

Does the raven really care about things, does he really know, does he move with the power Koyukon elders hold in such great regard? And would he manifest his power for me, or only for someone born into a tradition of respect for the spirit in nature?

Then my wondering finds a new direction: if the raven has power, does he recognize it himself and use it consciously? Koyukon hunters say he does. If the raven brings you luck it's to serve himself, because he will eat whatever you leave for him from the kill. (Nelson, 1989, p. 25)

When teaching ecopsychology classes, I always take my students outdoors, usually to a semiwilderness place, where they are invited to engage the natural world as fully and intimately as possible. I ask them to step across a self-designated threshold, beyond their accustomed modes of perception, and to imagine the immediate environment as a living entity made up of many autonomous and aware beings. I ask them to have a conversation with a stone, a tree, or even an old rusty tin can they might find in the dry riverbed. When students feel challenged by this, when it feels too whimsical or irrational, I encourage them by saying, "Just try. Pretend if you have to. Imagine that the things you encounter have something to say to you." No doubt, to converse with nonhuman objects is a stretch for the modern imagination. Like many of my students, I too have doubts about the intersubjectivity of the outer world. I wonder if I'm just projecting my thoughts onto things, anthropomorphizing, or if I'm just making it all up. And, even if the things in the outer world do have subjective lives of their own, who am I to participate in them?

Nevertheless, I ask that we keep trying. Maybe the voices won't come in words but rather in feeling states, poems, or memories. Maybe they will be heard in the silence, in the soft hum of a honey bee, or in the dusty wind on one's face. However nature expresses itself to us—through thoughts, feelings, intuitions, or sensations—my goal as an instructor is to help students (and myself) suspend, if only for a moment, the culturally bred skepticism that the material world is lifeless, unfeeling, and unresponsive.

This continual moving back and forth between belief and doubt is a familiar pattern for those of us who have been conditioned to distrust anything that cannot be rationally explained. Richard

Nelson, in his 1989 beautifully written essay, “The Face in a Rain-drop,” in which he writes about his experiences among the Koyukon peoples in northern Alaska, begins by asking, “Does the raven actually care about things?” This question leaves us in a state of inquisitiveness. Although it is difficult at times to imagine that the raven cares, experience and intuition tell me it is possible; and, just like following the illusive raven, I follow this paradox into unknown territory. For me, this is the practice of ecopsychology: the willingness to step beyond the boundaries of the familiar and to entertain the mysterious space where the distinction between psyche and nature, the inner and outer worlds, is much less defined. The practice asks us to balance rational thought with ambiguity and hard fact with feeling. As Terry Tempest Williams writes, “Paradox preserves mystery, and mystery inspires belief” (1994, p. 53). Ecopsychology is a science, indeed, but it is also a spiritual practice.

Long before the term “ecopsychology” hit the press, Carl Jung had written extensively about the problems humans face today due to their separation from nature. He even went so far as to claim that much of our current neuroses are a result of too much civilization, writing, “Civilization is a most expensive process and its acquisitions have been paid for by enormous losses” (1954/1976, p. 208). What are the losses? Many are obvious: the destruction of our environment, species extinction, the loss of the planet’s integrity due to global warming, to name a few. But other losses are less apparent and more difficult to define: “something we have never properly understood” (p. 254). In his essay “Healing the Split” (1954/1976), Jung speaks of this loss as the loss of numinosity that nature once held for us prior to the dawn of scientific thinking. *Numen*, according to Webster’s dictionary, is defined as a spiritual force or influence that is often identified with a natural place, phenomenon, or object. *Numinous* is described as supernatural and mysterious, filled with a sense of the presence of the holy. Without a sense of the numinous, the natural world becomes dehumanized, and our emotional connection begins to dissolve. “We have stripped all things of their mystery and numinosity; nothing is holy any longer,” writes Jung (p. 254), and as a result, “our psyche is profoundly disturbed” (p. 255).

The Need for Numinosity

Through scientific understanding, our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events, which hitherto had a symbolic meaning for him. Thunder is no longer the voice of a god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree means a man’s

life, no snake is the embodiment of wisdom, and no mountain still harbors a great demon. Neither do things speak to him nor can he speak to things, like stones, springs, plants, and animals. He no longer has a bush-soul identifying him with a wild animal. His immediate communication with nature is gone forever, and the emotional energy it generated has sunk into the unconscious. (Jung, 1954/1976, p. 254)

Jung is not suggesting that we should forget science, go back in time, and become “native,” but he is suggesting that we critically reflect on our Western modern presumption that we humans, particularly those of European descent, are unaffected by forces beyond our control. Although we assume to have rid the natural world of numinous spirits and supernatural beings, their archetypal energies remain as strong as ever, albeit now within the unconscious. For Jung, archetypes are ancient, primordial images that govern our lives. They are the source of mythology, dreams, fantasies, and ideas, and ultimately, the force of life itself. Myths about the earth, human love and coupling, the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, and every enduring story contain an archetypal structure. Because we cannot “see” archetypes per se, our knowledge of their presence is always by inference; we feel, sense, or intuit the presence of an archetype by its numinous quality and emotional effect upon the psyche. But when we are unconscious, their instinctual energy can possess us in the most destructive ways. Like a hurricane, archetypes can sweep up everyone, and everything, along their path, as exemplified in devastating events such as the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, and more recently, the destruction of the World Trade Center and its aftermath. And, for this reason, Jung asserts that “Confrontation with an archetype or instinct is an *ethical* problem of the first magnitude” (1947/1969, p. 208).

Although it is impossible to say exactly where archetypes originate—Jung traces them both to transcendent forms as well as to instinctual processes—the point is, like the nature spirits of old, encountering the archetype directs our attention beyond our egoic selves and reminds us that there is more to reality than our conscious minds can accommodate. And here we find ourselves going back and forth again between knowing and mystery, for although Jung spoke strongly of his empirical observations of the archetypes, he also recognized that it is impossible to truly know the distinction between what exists “out there” and what begins inside.

...the outer event occurs simultaneously inside the psyche and reaches consciousness by the usual pathways of inner perception. However, it is not always possible to determine whether a primary inner process is accompanied by an outer one or whether, con-

versely, a primary outer event is being reflected in a secondary process. (Jung, 1975, p. 539)

Whether in human actions or in the forces and cycles of nature, whenever we encounter the archetype, the perceived split between inner and outer worlds is brought into question. This is the gift of the archetype. It always leaves us in a state of bewilderment.

In today's overly rational world, we are witnessing a hunger for mystery and for the sense of bewilderment that has been lost in the modern psyche. This is demonstrated in the current fascination Western people have with indigenous spiritual practices and beliefs, particularly Native American, and with the popularity of films like *Avatar* that portray a mystical connection with the natural world. But we must be cautious not to fall into literalizing and assuming a cause-and-effect cure for our disease of disconnection. There are no weekend workshops, self-help books, or trips to Brazil which can replace the loss. All these things might be helpful along the way, but in themselves they are not the cure. Rather, as Jung proposes, we must embark on the path of individuation, which as difficult as it can be simply means finding our own unique way back to our indigenous psyche, which has always existed within us but has been disastrously denied and ignored. And here I would like to suggest that individuation is not so much psychological development but rather a psychological return. Jung says something similar when he writes, "Individuation is not only an upward but also a downward process...our civilizing potential has led us down the wrong path" (1977, p. 202).

With this in mind, a depth-oriented ecopsychology cannot be described so much as a new and innovative therapeutic model but rather as a recognition of the importance of reclaiming our ancestral past that gives value to the unseen and numinous qualities found both in psyche and nature. The late Theodore Roszak, one of the founders of ecopsychology, strongly supports the claim that ecopsychology is rooted in indigenous beliefs and practices,

...its sources are old enough to be called aboriginal. Once upon a time all psychology was "ecopsychology." No special word was needed. The oldest healers in the world, the people our society once called "witch doctors," knew no other way to heal than to work within the context of environmental reciprocity (1995, pp. 5–6)

This brings up the very difficult question: How do we reclaim an aboriginal way of being with nature when the losses of which we speak are directly tied into our European legacy of environmental destruction and cultural genocide? How do we approach indigenous communities—those whose land we have stolen and destroyed—for instance, and say, "We were wrong about our connection to nature;

we want that bond back"? The chasm that modern science has perpetuated between us and nature may not be as big as the cultural wound of our acts of genocide that keep us trapped on the rational side of the fence. Nevertheless, in order to survive in relationship to the natural world, we have to try and cross over. The first step, of course, is to apologize to, and grieve for, the people and land we have hurt and, second, to create our own ceremonies and practices for healing. In truth, there is really no rational way to approach this. We have to step out of our comfort zone and enter that unfamiliar territory of the unknown. As Nelson reminds us in his essay, living in reciprocity with the natural world does not require knowledge and understanding as much as it does ethics and compassion:

When I lived with Koyukon people I adopted these same rules for myself [code of behavior], not because I understood the mystery behind them or because I fantasized about 'becoming' Koyukon, but because I felt compelled by the wisdom of establishing a moral contact with the natural world which gives sustenance. (1989, p. 13)

Depth Psychology's Contribution to a Primitive Ecopsychology

What does it mean to cultivate an indigenous relationship with nature? Jung's writing on the "primitive" or "archaic" man may lend us some insights on how to follow this downward path of individuation. Much of Jung's nature writings include the terms "primitive" and "archaic" to indicate the part of the human psyche that retains its roots in our evolutionary past (Sabini, 2002, p. 17). He claims that no matter how modern or "civilized" we consider ourselves to be, our primordial psyche is never far behind, and this is the part of us that is biologically and psychically attached to nature.

There is no disputing that Jung often inappropriately used the terms "primitive" and "archaic," particularly when referencing a particular group of people. But, in his best sense, he also used these terms to describe states of consciousness that are less tied to a particular culture per se but rather to humans in general. Nevertheless, Jung often falls into the trap of pointing to actual tribal, indigenous groups of people to help illustrate what he means by "primitive" (Deloria, 2009). We find this when he writes about his experiences among the Native Americans of the Taos Pueblo as well as the Elgonis in East Africa. And this is where the term gets confusing. Is "primitive" a hypothetical idea to express our earthy ancestral past, or does it refer to actual non-Westernized, land-based people? It is a little bit of both. There is no question that modern, Western people have much to learn from so-called primitive cultures, particularly in

how to live in a balanced relationship to nature. On the other hand, we have to be careful not to use the term “primitive” within the construct of an evolutionary hierarchy that positions “primitive” at the bottom rungs of human development. Although this hierarchy has been largely dismantled in contemporary, postmodern thinking, there is still an unconscious tendency for us to view modern, Westernized people as more psychologically developed and sophisticated than those who live in non-industrial, nontechnological societies. For this reason, I prefer the word “indigenous” in place of Jung’s “primitive.” At some point down our ancestral legacy, we were all indigenous to a place, and our psyche remembers this connection—even if vaguely.

Nevertheless, it is useful to look into Jung’s usage of the term “primitive,” even if just to highlight the cultural misunderstandings of his time and to offer ourselves a way around this uncomfortable term. In Jung’s writing, for instance, “primitive” is often used to indicate the psychological state of *participation mystique*, a term he acquired from anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Brühl to describe the nonrational, mystical relationship that “primitive” people have with the objects in the outer world. To be in a state of *participation mystique* is to be in essentially a childlike state of unconsciousness in which people identify with their environment to such an extent that they cannot distinguish themselves from objects in the outer world or exert any self-will apart from the influence of their environmental surroundings. This is in contrast to the “civilized” or modern psyche, which has developed a greater spectrum of consciousness. Consciousness, in this context, is the capacity to distinguish oneself from the unconscious and from unconscious projections onto the outer environment. In this respect, to be in a “primitive” state of mind is to be negatively enmeshed with the environment, as opposed to the modern mind-set which is more differentiated from one’s outer surroundings.

But isn’t this type of enmeshment with nature what we ecopsychologists are looking to recover? And don’t we want to be so fully engaged with our environment that it actually governs our actions rather than us governing it? And, even more so, isn’t our mystical participation with the world exactly that which triggers a sense of the numinous? I think, to some extent, Jung would agree. Speaking of modern consciousness, he criticizes the tendency to use knowledge as a means for repressing all irrational data—essentially, unconscious material—as a means for demystifying the world.

The more power man had over nature, the more his knowledge and skill went to his head, and the deeper became his contempt for the merely natural and accidental, for all irrational data—including the objective psyche, which is everything that consciousness is not. (1957/1970, p. 291)

Clearly, a more careful analysis of Jung’s work around this topic is being asked for. Although Jung often uses the term “civilized” to indicate those with a higher capacity for consciousness, a more thorough reading of Jung also suggests that so-called “civilized” man is not so conscious after all. The truth is that modern man has wrongly confused higher levels of consciousness with his capacity for scientific and rational thinking. Simply put, he has equated consciousness with his ego. In this respect, having denied the existence of the unconscious psyche, modern man is actually more unconscious, more susceptible to false notions, and more likely to find himself possessed by the very archetypal forces he denies. This is what Jung refers to as “the cult of consciousness”: the ultimate belief in our capacity to understand the world apart from the multifaceted, unfathomable unconscious psyche.

...we lack all knowledge of the unconscious psyche and pursue the cult of consciousness to the exclusion of all else. Our true religion is a monotheism of consciousness, a possession by it, coupled with a fanatical denial of the existence of fragmentary autonomous systems. (1929/1967, p. 36)

As with any cult, ego-consciousness has become the matrix by which everything is measured. We can’t see beyond ourselves.

Richard Nelson, in his essay, also highlights our restricted modern-day consciousness and scientific understanding of the world when he considers the tree from the Koyukon perspective,

As I run my hands over the roots, I try to imagine a scientific explanation for their marvelous shape—probably a chemical process that takes place inside the cells, a blind mechanical adaptation to weight and stress, all carried on without mind or consciousness....but this would seem as ridiculous as suggesting that the tree responds to its own senses and consciously designs itself to the contour of rock, the pull of gravity, and the peril of storms. (1989, p. 15)

Nelson does a beautiful move here in revealing the limitations of modern science without disregarding it altogether. In other words, he walks between two worlds, resisting opting for one tradition over the other. This brings into realization that the most damaging aspect of modern man’s belief in science is not science itself but the presumption that scientific knowledge is the only source of *true* knowledge and that the capstone of consciousness is rational thinking. In Nelson’s account, those who might be called primitive, specifically the Koyukon, are no less conscious, no less logical than modern people but, rather, less inclined to view their way of understanding the world as the *only* way. In the Koyukon way of

thinking, there are multiple traditions in which groups chose to operate, each with its own rules for conduct:

The men I hunted with said that whenever they did something not covered by a traditional rule, they kept track of how their luck was affected afterward. They also said that people who believe differently from themselves seem to be exempted from the rules; but anyone who chooses to follow the traditional way becomes subject to its consequences. (1989, p. 12)

The vital distinction between modern and indigenous peoples, as described in Nelson's and Jung's work, therefore, is not so much how each thinks but the presumptions that underlie the way each goes about gathering and interpreting information. For the indigenous, knowledge is about living and surviving in reciprocity with the natural world. In modern culture, knowledge has been used primarily for domination and control (Rowland, 2007). Jung makes this clear throughout much of his writing about nature: "It is civilized man who strives to dominate nature and therefore devotes his greatest energies to the discovery of natural causes which will give him the key to her secret laboratory" (1931/1970, p. 66). "Arbitrary powers" are resisted and denied because their existence would be proof that modern man has not achieved his ability to dominate nature.

Thus, the first step toward a truly indigenous ecopsychology begins with dismantling the ego's heroic position and confronting the need for power and control. It means the willingness to "stoop low" enough, as Jung puts it (1954/1976, p. 262), to attend to those aspects of psyche that don't necessarily fit into our rational categories—attending to dreams, symptoms, synchronicities, and archetypal forces as if they were real and valid sources of knowledge. It basically means, in Jungian terms, to follow the path of individuation.

And this is what sets Jungian depth psychology apart from all other psychologies, which focus mostly on individual wellness and healing. Wholeness, the primary goal of individuation, has little to do with the individual per se, but rather the individual's ability to recognize and live with the knowledge that he or she is part of a much greater reality. In other words, individuation ultimately extends the individual beyond the individual self and situates us in the midst of a world that is alive and full of many voices. It means, despite all our cultural baggage, taking the risk and living as if the raven cared.

Postscript

To write about an indigenous ecopsychology has been a tremendous challenge. As I struggled through this article, editing and reediting, I found myself caught in various complexes—voices in my head that questioned my authority to write about anything having to do with

indigenous ways of understanding the world. Who am I, a white Western woman, to even suggest that those of us of European descent can reestablish a participatory relationship with the natural world? And what would my Native American friends think? Would I offend them with my gross generalizations and my own unconscious presumptions? But, on the other hand, as a practicing ecopsychologist, how can I avoid the task of working through these cultural and psychological complexes that have prevented a true intimacy with nature?

For 15 years I've been purposefully going into the wilderness with these very questions in mind. Every year, for 15 years, I have gone out into the desert somewhere—Death Valley, Eureka Valley, the Inyo Mountains in California—for four days and nights of fasting and solitude. During these times I work hard to shed my Cartesian notions of separation and to tune myself to a world that is animate and speaking. I have intently listened for the sounds of sage brush singing and the laughter of lizards at dawn. I have turned my attention toward those things I don't rationally understand. But I rarely succeed for long. My old patterned thinking always gets the best of me, and I walk through the landscape caught up with the voices in my head, oblivious to the miracle of life that surrounds me.

While writing this piece, all the annoying voices were present, telling me to give up the task. As usual, when I get writer's block I go for a walk to shake loose the obstructions. I walk for as long as it takes to allow the trees, rocks, and birds to infiltrate my senses and to quiet the chatter of my mind. This time I was in an urban park in Los Angeles. As I turned the corner along a stretch of trail that wove through oaks and manzanita, I came face to face with a coyote at a distance of about twenty feet. I don't remember how long we stood there, looking at each other in a frozen gaze, but it was long enough for me to ask the question, "Does the coyote care?"

And then I realized I'd been tricked. How funny that, even while writing about *participation mystique*, I was in a total state of *participation mystique* myself! All those voices in my head are not mine! Although I assume they belong to "me" and that I can control them at will, ultimately they bring me down to my knees in an act of prayer and supplication. Rather than shutting me down, with this realization, the world opens up. There are no clear boundaries.

So this is my offering to the coyote, who lives between two worlds, between city and wilderness, between the known and the mystery, and continues to survive.

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