

ECOPSYCHOLOGY 101

Therapy For a Stressed Out Society

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Why is it that I always wait until the last minute to write my contribution for Food & Leisure? Allow me to answer in two words: human nature!

It is this paradox called 'human nature' that a new breed of psychologists calling themselves Ecopsychologists are trying to comprehend. I say paradox because nature is so perfect and humans so complicated. We seek direction, power, balance and harmony in our lives by reaching out, when all the time we could be reaching in and trusting our own nature.

But what can we truly expect from our human nature? According to Michael J. Cohen, founder of *Project Nature Connet*, we have been socially programmed to believe that we have five senses and to live 98% of our lives indoors. Cohen has been researching the field of ecopsychology for many years and his studies indicate that we actually have a total of 53 senses. Awakening these dormant senses through a series of 'nature-connecting activities' is his way of making humans face their true nature. Cohen's work inspires more and more individuals to 'consume' sustainable activities (e.g. creativity, communication, movement, appreciation, green sport), instead of consuming material goods.

Having always being fascinated by human beings, I pose a question that permeates my daily existence: "Why do we as a society continue depleting our natural resources even though we know that it is to the detriment of our survival? Is our collective consciousness actually wishing for global suicide? My observations of our dysfunctional society make it difficult for me to believe otherwise. Our society is stressed out, overweight, out of shape, depressed, spiritually hungry and suffering from all sorts of disorders, syndromes and diseases. Yet we continue at the same crazy pace, day in and day out. We seek quick fixes in the form of antidepressants, miracle drugs, diet milkshakes, plastic surgery, or temporary relief in the form of smoking, alcohol and or drugs.

But deep down inside, from what are we suffering? Is our environmental crisis the consequence of our human suffering? Are we so caught up in our own little personal dramas that we forget we are part of a much larger community? Are we capable of humanitarian actions as in sharing our natural resources, or is life a wild zoo, designed for the survival of the fittest? Are we willing to slow down and take the time to explore the dark side of our human nature to find out who we truly are? If science and technology are so powerful, what great invention will protect us from future environmental disasters like ice storms, hurricanes, floods, droughts and viral epidemics. What lessons is mother nature trying to teach us?

Psychologists and ecologists are now working together to illuminate these important questions. Ecopsychologists believe that by understanding the psychological aspects of our environmental crisis, we will then be able to start caring for our planet and thus for each other. But are we running out of time? Can we keep ignoring and denying the interconnection of all humans, nature and the cosmos. We have much to learn from the wise earth and the spiritual teachings of indigenous peoples and the early pagan cultures. Are we open and ready for such teachings or do we label them as barbaric and uncivilized. Remember, “the map is not the territory.” Until you have experienced these teachings one cannot judge their effects. One way to re-awaken our love of nature and the desire to protect it is to experience a wilderness adventure.

Many people lead non-conformist lifestyles, not as a radical act of rebellion but as an example of choosing ‘voluntary simplicity’ over ‘voluntary consumerism’. Their lifestyle choices are reflections of what they believe to be the truth: that we cannot carry on living and enjoying the goods of this planet if we are not willing to give something back in return. I know of many people who give back simply by embracing the philosophy that moderation is beautiful.

Fighting for equality, dignity and human rights should still be a priority on our list of social actions, but it is a worthless fight if we no longer have fresh air, clean water and fertile land. There is a time to work and there is a time to play. However, in the next millennium, both of these behaviors will have to be governed by solemn environmental and philosophical personal ethics if the human race is to survive.

There is one thing that differentiates us from the animal kingdom and that is freedom of choice. Have we truly evolved as a human race? How different are our choices from those of our ancestors? We think of ourselves as intelligent yet do we act in a preventive manner? Do we respect and model the natural cycle of Life-Death-Rebirth so evident in the teachings of nature or is the hunger of science for ‘power over nature’ bound to annihilate us all? If not physically, spiritually? The Y2K computer crisis might just be a little reminder of our fallibility.

Now is the time to *think* – the coming millennium a time to act!