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FOR ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

Developing A Greater Sense of Belonging: An Art & Method for Ecological Sustainability

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INTRODUCTION

“You didn’t come into this world. You came out of it, like a wave from the ocean. You are not a stranger here.” Alan W. Watts

Among our most basic needs as human beings is that of being accepted by others of the society in which we live. As we develop, our need for acceptance expands into greater circles of interrelationship with other people. Through maturity, we further develop understandings of cultural variations and recognize what is shared in-common between greater variations of cultural practices. It is this search and discovery of what is shared in-common, among cultural variation and diversity, that we may sense, recognize, and rediscover our greater shared sense of belonging in Nature. The word *common* has its roots in the concept of equally belonging and shared alike. It is the root of the word *community*, and most importantly of *communion*, or that which is shared in-common through participation in direct natural sensory relationship.

However arguable, through human lifestyle practices and effects on global climate change, cultural and political divisiveness, and an exploitive natural resource economic philosophy, it would appear that we as humans have become human-centered, and in the USA particularly, perhaps even narcissistic and myopic. Our abilities to seek an in-common relationship among one another and the greater ecological community of Earth, have therefore become greatly impaired. In the words of my advisor and friend Dr. Michael J. Cohen:

“Our ability to cognitively abstract our contact with the world constantly takes our sensory experience and hides it under a veil of thought” (Cohen, et.al.,2003, p.63).

Our thinking has become cognitively separated from our greater inherent belonging in Nature, and our abilities to engage our inborn natural sensory communication (in-common) systems have become hidden under our veil of human-centered and self-absorbed thought.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to offer a unique pedagogy for developing ones own pathway to ecological sustainability through the Natural Systems Thinking Process (NSTP), developed by Dr. Cohen nearly sixty years ago (Cohen, et.al., 2003). This pathway is a part of my doctoral dissertation, completed in July, 2008. It is through the experiences of my own pathway and NSTP process that I hope to introduce and encourage a meaningful and healthy human-nature relationship with all things in Nature. By dissolving our culturally induced attitudes of separation and dominion over Nature, we can once again recognize that we are made of and are part of Nature in every moment. With each breath, we belong to the greater supportive ecosystem community of Nature. Every 5-7 years our body is completely replaced, molecule by molecule, with Nature, through the nourishing foods we eat and the water we drink. Through a simple practice, we can revalue our inborn sensory capacities, in communion with our unique cognitive abilities of thought and reason, and validate the whole of our natural being. In this way, we can redevelop and revalue our unique Natural Systems Thinking Process (Cohen et.al. 2003) and resonant with natural systems that we share in-common with any particular person. Through a practice of integrating natural sensory attractions in moment-to-moment awareness, we can therefore develop a more ecological based lifestyle oriented toward global citizens of peace with all things on Earth, and thus a consciously applied natural systems approach to ecological sustainability. Our awareness becomes complete with such perceptual and cognitive integration and participation, and develops into a resonant sense of belonging with the greater ecological community of Nature—in both human and non-human relationships.

SEPARATION FROM BELONGING

In the mental and spiritual realm, the counterpart of technology is culture, which modifies and even supersedes human nature in the same way technology modifies physical nature. In thus mastering nature with technology, and mastering human nature with culture, we distinguish ourselves from the rest of life, establishing a separate human realm (Eisenstein, 2007; p.6).

Throughout human civilization's global existence with this Earth, the most destructive premise and issue in human thinking, lifestyle, and economic practices, is the belief that human beings are separate from and thus dominant over the natural world that supports them. *"Whether we believe that our dominion derives from God or from our own ambition, there is little doubt that the way we currently relate to the environment is wildly inappropriate"* (Gore, 1993, p. 238). This dominion over nature mentality provides the ambition for humans to think they have the right to manage and control nature, for their benefit alone. Through such thinking and dominance management, we psychologically separate and devalue our natural or inherent affinities and belonging with all things in Nature. This creates a conflict between our natural born relationship with Nature, or what Chellis Glendinning calls our "primal matrix" (Glendinning, 1994, p.5), and our abstracted thought motivated and disconnected behaviors. Such actions, behaviors, and conflicts can establish unnecessary stresses and anxieties.

When such cognitive abstraction contributes to separation from and denial of our inborn Nature, it can create suspicion, denial, and value narrowing of such inherent Nature in others. Distrust of other people, prejudices, segmentation, and separation on social and cultural levels can then be easily established in ones thinking. Natural system connections that could be held in-common, and could be helpful in conflict resolution, are now an abstracted story or Nature-

disconnected belief in-which each person or persons now have increasingly distorted perspectives. Mutual reverence among one another, wholeness, and well-being through ecological belonging in communion, is thus short-cut. Western Civilization has been a proving ground for such prejudicial, bigoted, and discriminatory patterns. Slavery of Native Americans and African peoples in the United States are among countless examples.

A PATHWAY TO PEACE AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

In Stillness, we can touch Peace.

In Openness, we can befriend.

(Lesson from female Hummingbird)

Introduction

By inherent or natural inborn sense of belonging, I am referring to being a wholly sensory conscious part of and in healthy participation with the greater natural and ecological community that sustains us. E.O. Wilson states that the basis of “biophilia” is, “*the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms. Innate means hereditary and hence part of ultimate human nature*” (Wilson, 1993, p.31). Affinities, and natural sensory attraction energy bonds, are what hold our bodies together. Molecularly, these bonds are attracted to self-organize and self-regulate in a sustainable way. As living beings, we are attracted to foods that sustain us organically. These nutrients transform into molecularly supportive attraction bonds that therefore sustain our bodies, nervous and sensory systems, etc.. Our natural sensory system is that which communicates with the natural world in and around us. We breathe because our body is attracted to be in a life sustaining interrelationship with the atmosphere and biosphere. There is a mutually beneficial and in-common relationship established in this process, which

therefore benefits plants and the whole of Nature. Our sense of hunger and thirst signals our need for nourishment and water. Our sense of excretion signals our need to dispose of bodily waste. Knowing how to relate with Nature is not something we learned abstractly from a book. We were naturally born with this self-sustaining and self-regulating organic sensory communication system. In order to be a part of something, there must be a communication system for such a relationship. This is the very root of ecology. Our natural sensory system is this essential life-giving interface, self-regulating, and communication relationship with Nature. Through this natural sensory system, we are perceptually aware of our belonging with the greater natural community, and of what we share in-common with Nature. We know this through self-evidence.

John A. Livingston states that a sense of community is essentially “an awareness of simultaneous belonging to both a society and a place” (Livingston, 1996, p.132). Livingston’s use of the word “place” is inclusive of natural landscape and ecological relationship.

It is possible for the individual human being to retrieve the natural awareness of belonging to something infinitely broader and richer than the narrow enclosure of our belief systems, to rediscover (it was there all the time) a self that freely and joyfully identifies with myriad nonhuman existences (Livingston, 1996, p.139).

A Process for A Greater Sense of Belonging

How can we redevelop our whole integrated ecology of being, which is not overshadowed by the dominance of our often abstracted thought and reasoning capacities? By

ecology, I am referring to unique, sustainable, and diverse natural relationships with a natural area.

For the remainder of this section of the article, I will refer to my own personal experiences with the NSTP, and hope that each interested person will develop their own unique “Self-Realization” (Naess, 1987), pathways with this process. It is essential to state that the NSTP is in no way a doctrine or dogma, as it allows for each individual to develop and evolve their own participatory, unique, and intrinsic value in the whole of Nature. A consciousness of ecological place and belonging, therefore, emerges through a participatory perceptual and newly informed self-evident cognitive mix, without previous distorting and prejudicial thoughts clouding the present relationship.

Within the art and method of the NSTP, I have found most helpful the following basic elements of this unique nature-connected process, referred to here as *essential elements of the NSTP*.

“*Natural Attraction*” (Cohen, et al. 2003; p. 61). This term is drawn from the NSTP learning process and reorients me to conscious awareness of my natural sensory communication relationship with nature in people and all things. It clears and opens me to the perceptual and cognitive mix of the nature-connecting experience in the moment. My experience with this initial element is that it brings to mind that I need not allow projection of the analytical mind to overshadow my inborn and natural sensory system, in order to fully participate in the moment. *Natural attraction* places me in a nature-to-nature relationship or communion, and establishes an in-common non-verbal intelligence in which to proceed. Once this initial contact is established, in direct natural sensory relationship with a natural area and person, a deepening relationship process can begin.

Gaining consent from a natural attraction, in a natural area, deepens this nature-connected process through what I have learned to refer to as *Mutual Consent*. Mutual consent establishes a direct perceptual and cognitive relationship of communion and reciprocity with the human and more-than-human natural energy affinities that support and sustain nature in a self-organizing, sustainable, yet ever evolving wholeness. This phase of the NSTP I have found to be most profound in that it places me in a deep stillness with the phenomena of the moment, and removes my awareness of a human imposed sense of time, or any other prejudices.

At this point in the process of the NSTP, I register the phenomena, or nature-connected relationships, as *self-evidence*. Self-evidence means “to validate what we sense and feel” (Cohen et al., 2003, p. 112). It is the inborn ability of each human being to wholly integrate in-the-moment natural sensory attractions with our sense of reason and “compares these findings to our cultural attachments and their effects” (Cohen et al., 2003, p. 112). This major NSTP learning experience helps reorient the individual to revalue their inherent sense of belonging, in reciprocity with the natural community of place, both human and non-human.

Finding an attractive natural area to engage these *essential elements of the NSTP*, can re-stimulate ones’ inherent sense of belonging and community through a multitude of direct natural sensory “webstrings” (Cohen et al., 2003). One of the first feelings or sensations to clearly register within participants is the validation that what they are experiencing with nature, is also a part of and within them. This opens perceptual and cognitive awareness enough to further explore a whole sense of self, in communion with Nature. Primal awareness can thus be re-stimulated to dimensions previously unexplored, and uncluttered with abstract false storied prejudices.

Once this validation and confidence is established in the direct natural sensory and cognitive mix of phenomena, deeper inherent knowing will re-validate ones previously hidden sense of belonging with all of nature. Through this renewed development of inherent belonging with Nature, we can then begin to evolve our unique way of thinking and living that is ecologically sustainable and in peaceful harmony with the greater natural world around and within each of us. We can then practice such naturally in-common connections through our natural systems relationships with people. This establishes a lifestyle oriented toward peaceful citizenship with all things.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the development of Western Civilization, particularly, we as humans have egotistically allowed ourselves to psychologically abstract our contact with our inherent ecological relationship to all things in Nature. As these psychological thought and reasoning habits evolved, we falsely believed them as fact and proceeded to act as “stewards” or managers over the natural systems that support us. Although there are numerous practices available to help humans more consciously mature, we have culturally locked ourselves into a dominance of value narrowing behaviors and false belief systems.

In my experiences and practice of various peaceful nature connecting approaches, however, I have finally found a process that is non-dogmatic, cross-cultural, and gets to the natural systems root of our cultural distortions and conflicts. This, for me, is the Natural Systems Thinking Process. For any reader of this article who wishes to further explore this pedagogy, you may find a vast amount of information on-line at <http://www.naturalattractionecology.com/>

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