

Introduction

Transpersonal Ecopsychology by Way of Phenomenology and Contemplative Spirituality

All important ideas must include the trees, the mountains, and the rivers.

—Mary Oliver (2016, p. 18)

I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are.

—A young boy (Louv, 2008, p. 10)

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

—Laozi (Mitchell, 1988, p. 3)

Overture

The shared earth community is sending us a wild and sacred call, beckoning us to cultivate a mutually enhancing relationship between humankind and the rest of nature. In response to this summons, the present book will articulate a largely transpersonal, contemplative, nondual approach to ecopsychology. Our explorations will weave together insights from peoples' lived experience, mystical/contemplative spirituality (especially Zen Buddhism and Christian mysticism), phenomenological philosophy, psychoanalysis, and transpersonal psychology, with plenty of illustrative poetry along the way.

Conscious Contact with the Natural World: It All Begins Here

Perched on a low branch of a maple tree next to our driveway, a hawk caught my daughter's attention. We were playing soccer, and the raptor made her pause from her favorite game. "That's cool!" she said. We watched for a brief time until the big bird grew restless with our gaze and flew into the woods. "Do you know what that was?" I asked. "A hawk," Lily Claire replied. "What kind?" I said, casually intimating that different species share this wooded land with us. "I don't know, let's play!" I slipped in "broad-winged" while passing her the ball. Just a bit later we heard a rousing interplay of bird cries. Resounding squawks were coming from various places across the creek, and single high-pitched screeches were sounding in evident response. "What's happening over there?" I wondered aloud, stretching my luck with a teenager in hopes of nurturing her budding ecological awareness. I was glad to hear her quick reply: "That hawk is hassling some crows, and they're trying to scare it away. Now come on Dad, kick me the ball!" Soccer was more important that day, which was fine. It's a great game and we were having fun. I trusted that she had been touched by the hawk, and that his presence would live on in her in some mysterious way. I also knew she would meet him again. He is our neighbor after all!

The fabric of human life has always been woven with experiences like this. Always, until recently. Encounters with wildly diverse beings and elemental presences have helped comprise our very existence, just as our involvement has helped comprise theirs. Of course, the other-than-human natural world is immensely powerful and at times deadly dangerous. To idealize nature as all beautiful and nurturing is as deceptively alienating as seeing it merely as a threat or material resource for human exploitation. Yet the natural world is vital in bringing us into being and sustaining our lives in healthy ways. It cannot be otherwise. But many of us now go about our daily existence without appreciating the significance of this core (co)existential fact. Sometimes we actively repress it so as to avoid painful realities, or for temporary convenience or self-aggrandizement. Prime examples are the widespread denial of global warming and people's lack of awareness that the earth is now suffering a mass extinction of species. Both of these are human-generated perils, symptoms of humankind's confused, fear-filled estrangement from the rest of nature. Culturally sponsored beliefs, values, and lifestyles have created a world

dominated merely by interactions with other people and human artifacts. Most of us are losing the daily, conscious contact with the natural world that has nourished us since the very incipience of our species. We are now infecting ourselves with a malady unprecedented in human history: “nature-deficit disorder,” in Richard Louv’s (2008) foreboding phrase. The designation, a darkly ironic twist on attention-deficit disorder, is not a formally designated psychological disorder. Not yet. But we are definitely plagued by an insidious deficiency in the quality, amount, and consistency of attention we give to the natural world. As one fourth grade boy put it, “I like to play indoors better, ’cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are” (Louv, p. 10). Ominously, we know this young fellow is not alone in his sentiments. In most so-called developed countries, people’s lifestyles are (mostly) based on the (mostly) unconscious fantasy that we can detach ourselves from the rest of nature and still live well. Albeit normal today, this is delusional and unsustainable. By delusional I mean a false belief that is held rigidly in the face of clear evidence to the contrary. Our ecopsychological affliction is far more grievous than any officially designated psychopathology. In response to this crisis, the present book will offer a diagnosis of current maladies and opportunities—indeed, responsibilities—for healing and transformation.

If conscious contact with nature continues to decline, if the narrowly human world is all that young people experience, this depleted condition will become the unquestioned norm, simply the way things are and have to be. Nature will be further impoverished and so will we, but without even realizing what we are missing. What remains will be a haunting feeling that something is wrong, something important is absent. And it will be difficult to name. Anxiety, sadness, disorientation, irritation, and unhappiness will be exacerbated, but such symptoms will be attributed to sources unrelated to our alienation from the natural world. Such a deprived state ensures that ever more animals, plants, and natural places will be banished from our lives, driven away by climate disruption and habitat destruction (such as massive deforestation), poisoned by chemicals we spread, or totally vanquished at the hands of a nature-estranged culture dominated by unconstrained capitalist expansion and excessive (but ultimately unfulfilling) consumption. In a vicious circle, contact with nature will further decrease and distress will increase.

It is clear that we are in the midst of a severe ecological crisis. The fact that we are correspondingly undergoing a psychological, spiritual, and cultural crisis is less clear but even more dangerous. We humans

are intrinsically relational beings. Our well-being is enhanced and our suffering is healed largely by way of our interactions with others. So let us remember that the beings and presences of nature are relational partners who have forever graced our lives. *When we lose these natural companions and our relationships with them, we are losing something essential in human existence.* We are just beginning to reawaken to a fact that has been obvious to indigenous peoples across eras and cultures: conscious involvement with the natural world fosters our well-being and that of our nonhuman fellows, inseparably so and reciprocally so.

Introducing Ecopsychology

Ecopsychology is a relatively new field that explores the psychological dimension of our relations with the rest of nature and the ecological dimension of human psychology. Via theory and applied practice, ecopsychology is devoted to fostering a new turn in consciousness and culture, a psycho-spiritual-cultural transformation that enhances the *mutual well-being* of humankind and the rest of nature. The health of humans and the natural world co-arise in concert. So too the lack of well-being. We all flourish, or not, together. By well-being I mean truly holistic health: physical, psychological, sociocultural, spiritual, and ecological, with all these dimensions working synergistically with each other. While the biological world is being ravaged unconscionably, it is increasingly apparent that our current ecological maladies are not only biological ones. Looking just under the surface, we see that they involve a fundamental psychocultural and psychospiritual pathology. Our lives are being afflicted by a misguided (and misleading) dissociation, particularly the *supposed separation of one's self from others and of humankind from the more-than-human natural world.* Such feelings of disconnection sponsor fear toward all those who appear separate from us. Overcompensating in the face of this exaggerated threat, we presume ourselves superior to the rest of nature, elevated above the so-called "lower" animals (not to mention plants, mountains, oceans, deserts, atmosphere, and on and on). This creates a felt-belief that we are entitled to exploit the natural world, with little empathy, conscience, or care. But when we abuse the natural world, we abuse ourselves, our children, and generations to come, because all of these are inextricably involved with the rest of nature. This is the urgent crisis of consciousness and culture calling to us today.

The most commonly proposed solutions to our ecological maladies are technological: renewable energy, green buildings, desalination, seeding the atmosphere with small particles to block incoming radiation and reduce global warming, even colonizing Mars. Some, like the first three, are quite valuable. Some, like the last two, are based upon notions that created the ecological crisis in the first place: the wish that humans could master and control the natural world, or the wish that we could escape and avoid our real challenges. But no technology addresses the root causes of our suffering. That is where ecopsychology and allied approaches come in. The most crucial step is growing beyond our fantasy of separation. We find a similar ethos in indigenous cultures; in the nondual, contemplative branches of the world's spiritual traditions; and in phenomenological philosophy. Throughout this book I will weave together insights from Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism, existential and hermeneutic phenomenology, and psychoanalysis, including key ideas from the practice of psychotherapy. In doing so, I will craft a largely transpersonal—nondual, nonseparatist—version of ecopsychology that is complemented by existential and psychoanalytic insights. The present work aspires to help us heal our *supposed, apparent, or presumed* dissociation from the nonhuman natural world. The qualifiers in italic are important because our felt-sense of separation is a socially constructed belief, a collective fantasy that operates much like an individual delusion. It temporarily attenuates our anxieties—dread of death, lack of control over our lives, the sense that something is lacking—while creating far more suffering over time.

Because we will often return to the core endeavor of surpassing this afflictive sense of separation, let me share what I mean by “separate” and associated words. Separate can serve as a synonym for “particular” or “individual,” as in a separate self or tree. But that is not how I use it in this book. Of the dictionary meanings that I do hope to evoke, as a verb, separate means to sever a connection, divide, detach completely, force apart, disunite. (These readily transpose into adjectives.) As an adjective, separate signifies something apart, by itself alone, disconnected, divided from the rest. Two connotations from Middle English are especially pertinent for us: to be “cut off from the main body,” and, for marriage partners, to be “estranged.”¹ All of these meanings apply, depending on context, not to reality but to our (often unconsciously held) felt-beliefs about our relationship with the natural world. To be clear, every person and the whole human species are different in many ways from nature’s

other beings and presences. We can honor such differentiation while knowing that we can never really be separate, severed, or cut off from the great body of the animate earth. In Wilber's (1977) words, each of us is "'different,' but *not* separate" from every other (p. 107). To draw another metaphor from the etymologies I just shared, it is not uncommon for married couples to undergo a trial phase of "separation." But in humankind's intrinsic (yet often disavowed) marriage with the rest of nature, it is painfully obvious that our experiment with separation (or even presumed divorce) has been an utter disaster. We could say that ecopsychology is now stepping in as a kind of marriage therapist.

However, until recently, psychological research and clinical practice have mostly ignored our relations with the natural world. This very fact is an expression of humankind's experiential dissociation from the rest of nature. Psychologists have long worked to alleviate suffering that comes from biological, existential, interpersonal, intrapsychic, and sociocultural adversity. Biologically, we are conditioned by our genetics and the intrinsic vulnerability of our tender animal bodies. Existentially, the ordinary circumstances of life are difficult and painful (and marvelous too). Each of us will struggle with injuries, accidents, illnesses, and aging. We will inevitably lose everyone we love most dearly, as they will die before us or we before them. Interpersonally, people will hurt us and we will hurt them, often unintentionally and sometimes maliciously. Intrapsychically, in our relations with our own self, we can fall into patterns of tyrannizing ourselves with confusion, fear, self-doubt, shame, self-loathing, mistrust, and self-constriction. Here we bind ourselves with our own rope, as an old Zen saying has it. Social, cultural, economic, political, and legal forces support us in countless ways. Yet they can also be terribly oppressive, often reinforcing inequities of power, privilege, wealth, and justice. Think about matters such as racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance, militarism, consumerism, homelessness, unconscionable forms of corporate capitalism, and so on.

The field of psychology has studied and responded to all these painful challenges. However, only in the last couple of decades has it begun to work with the suffering associated with our alienation from and destruction of the animate earth. Ecopsychology now is helping us embrace the health-enhancing possibilities and ethical responsibilities that come with our interdependent involvement with the natural world. Immersed in life's beauty and its pain, it is evident that we coexist with all other beings and presences. Taking the next crucial step, eco-

psychology supports us to be in this life not just with each other but *for* each other, in the service of each other. Psychology and other fields are increasingly focusing on how nature can bolster human well-being: encouraging exercise, designing work environments that include natural phenomena, bathing in the fresh air of a forest to enhance our mood, procuring ingredients for new medicines from natural habitats, and so forth. Such initiatives are tremendously valuable. However, they can be one-sided, unintentionally reinforcing the exclusively human-focused bias that generated our eco(psycho)logical crisis. Therefore, ecopsychology endeavors to foster psychological, cultural, and spiritual capacities that ally with the rest of nature in a *mutually* enhancing way. I keep saying “the rest of nature” because we humans are natural beings. (Nature includes culture, as I will discuss.) When nature is ill, we too are ill. When children breathe polluted air, their bodies become polluted and respiratory illnesses tend to follow. When people are deprived of conscious contact with nature, anxiety, depression, and other psychological maladies arise. Conversely, when humans are ill—psychologically, culturally, spiritually—the nonhuman natural world will be ill. Alienated by the fantasies of human exceptionalism and self-interested individualism, governments, corporations, and individuals continue with business as usual even when confronted with disasters such as global warming. In a countercultural move, ecopsychology understands that taking care of the natural world is simultaneously taking care of human well-being.

Brief Overview of Chapters

Each chapter begins with pertinent epigraphs and an introductory “Overture.” The book is organized thematically such that a single chapter might offer views from Buddhist psychology, Christian mysticism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis on a distinctive concern. Our partners in dialogue will be David Abram, Matsuo Bashō, Thomas Berry, William Blake, Martin Buber, Shākyamuni Buddha, Eihei Dōgen, Meister Eckhart, James Finley, Jane Goodall, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel Levinas, David Loy, Joanna Macy, John Muir,² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Thomas Merton, Thich Nhat Hanh, Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, Ken Wilber, and others.

Chapter 1 celebrates joyous, pleasurable, revelatory, transformative experiences with the natural world. This will help us appreciate earth’s healing, life-enhancing qualities, thereby sponsoring the kind of gratitude

and care that are so often lacking in today's nature-estranged world. Chapter 2 explores the rampant death and destruction of the natural world currently taking place. By creating experiential access to the reality that the earth is suffering a mass extinction of species, the chapter guides us into working with grief as a key constituent of ecopsychology. Chapter 3 considers the fact that humans are inherently relational beings. By plundering nature, we are vanquishing relational partners who have forever graced our lives. In abdicating conscious contact with nature, we are disavowing crucial relationships. Both of these moves destroy something essential at the heart of being human. Chapter 4 considers how the historical and cultural conditions of the modern era amplified the socially constructed view that humans are separate from, elevated above, superior to, and thereby entitled to dominate and exploit the rest of nature. Chapter 5 looks at the development of the ego or separate self-sense (in childhood and beyond) in order to deepen our understanding of the way we humans are afflicted by stories, feelings, and actions of separation. Chapter 6 offers a transpersonal, contemplative approach to ecopsychology by way of the Christian mystical tradition. A crucial transformative element involves seeing ourselves and the rest of nature as an expression of the infinite depths of life. Relatedly, the mystics advocate a psychospiritual metamorphosis wherein we surrender or transcend our exclusive identification with our supposedly separate, autonomous ego, and thereby realize an infinitely deeper, transpersonal sense of self and way of being. Chapter 7 works with the writings of the Zen poet Bashō in order to craft a contemplative therapy for our eco(psycho)logical maladies, one that fosters a movement from ego-centered alienation to eco-centered intimacy. The chapter includes ecopsychological insights from Buddhist psychology. Chapter 8 shows how humans and the rest of nature are always participating in and creatively contributing to a non-dual, transpersonal, conversational, ecological form of consciousness, one that transcends yet includes our conventional individual consciousness. Awakening in this participatory conversation, we may realize that nature's dynamic inter-responsive field is simultaneously who we are and that for which we are summoned to loving care. Chapter 9 explores the common malady of bodily desensitization and disidentification, a key variant of our overall dissociation from the rest of nature. We will show how the natural world can foster embodied relational attunement; and, correspondingly, how such conscious attunement can be mutually healing for the rest of nature and for ourselves. Chapter 10 explores how the natural world is

ever calling upon us, and that each of us is irreplaceably responsible for answering that call. Our well-being and that of others turns on how we take up such appeals. Countering our conventional, separatist stance, chapter 11 explores how love is our nature, our calling, our path, and our fruition. The culminating coda freshly gathers the book's major ideas and envisions ways to take further steps.

Placing Powerfully Charged Words in Context(s): Nature and the Natural World

I want to affirm the mysterious, complex, indeterminate, evocative quality of key words, and especially of the *lived phenomena* to which they point. The preceding heading alludes to “charged” words: nature, mystery, reality, spirit, buddha-nature, true nature, true self, the Dao, the way, God, sacred, holy, nonduality, contemplative, mystical, ethical, love, life, and so on. Each holds a powerful energetic and disclosive charge. Given these words, truly offerings for mutual contemplation, an author and a reader have a reciprocal task, one that is far more important than quibbling over strictly preestablished and fixed meanings. Our responsibility is to release the latent charge of these words (and associated stories) so as to foster fresh understanding and loving interactions. In this way, an overly familiar term can come alive as a transformative “turning word.” This is a Zen expression for a word (or phrase) that is welcomed so openly and deeply that it sponsors a real turning of our consciousness and way of being.

“Love” and “compassion” will often be used interchangeably because I understand the second to be a variant of the (more inclusive) first. With compassion's Latin roots evoking a sense of deep care and “suffering with” another, sometimes I opt for this term when the context involves our response to pain. I will often speak of the “beings and elemental presences” of the natural world. I use “beings” for biological organisms and “presences” for all other differently animate forms of nature. For the latter, I mean variations of the classic elements of air, earth, water, and fire: presences that are airy (sky, wind, breath), earthy (soil, stone, bone), watery (rain, oceans, tears), and fiery (sun, lightning, the firing of synapses). Most presences are conventionally deemed inanimate and insentient, but it only takes a little shift in awareness to sense their dynamic liveliness. For example, I once heard a woman tell of a powerful

encounter on a mountain path. Walking along she was suddenly struck by the way an immense rock wall rose sharply up from the trail. This stopped her in tracks instantly. Gazing in awe at the sheer stone face of the cliff, she said she felt “the living presence of God.” Experiences like this are why I say that these phenomena are differently animate. Similarly, each presence is really a “presencing.” This unusual locution conveys the vivid dynamic (inter)activity we feel when meeting, say, a flowing stream, cold wind rushing through our hair, or a dancing campfire. This is much like the connotations already built into the word “being,” invoking not merely a reified objective entity but its lively shining forth, its *being*. All presencing includes hidden, implicit, unmanifested, or not fully manifested (yet nonetheless intimated) dimensions.

The word “nature” is far more mysterious, intrinsically resisting any prescribed, delimited, firmly fixed, readily graspable definition. “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language” (Williams, 2015, p. 164), as one scholarly survey of the most significant English words concluded. I have done plenty of foolish things in my time but I am not so foolish as to try to precisely define the word nature. The depths of what it refers to, how it functions, and what it can summon forth in us are truly ineffable and infinite. One cannot de-fine something that is in-finite, de-limit something limitless. Nonetheless, to suggest the interrelated network of meanings that this word carries, I will offer a few remarks. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) tells us that it derives from the Latin *nāturā*, which means “birth, constitution, character, course of things”; and from *nascī*, “to be born,” thus highlighting its dynamic, nonreifiable quality. The dictionary goes on to articulate 15 different definitions, beginning with “the essential qualities or properties of a thing” (1971, p. 1900). Other variants include: “the general inherent character or disposition of mankind [sic]”; “the material world”; and “the features and products of the earth itself, as contrasted with those of human civilization” (p. 1900).³

Building upon this array, Gary Snyder (1990) provides a revealing reflection on the word nature. It can refer to “‘the outdoors’—the physical world including all living things” (p. 8). Nature often connotes that which is “other-than-human” (p. 8). Snyder then quotes the OED regarding “the material world” and adds that this includes “the products of human action” (p. 8). In some versions of this encompassing meaning, we could claim that “*everything* is natural” (p. 8). This would include, say, megacities, industrial toxins, nuclear weapons, the Holocaust, and global warming. Snyder says that he prefers the following meaning for nature:

“The physical universe and all its properties” (p. 9). Imagining *everything* to be natural reminds us of the all-embracing, all-permeating quality of nature. And it dissolves the core dissociative fantasy that terribly afflicts us today, namely, the supposed disconnection of humankind from the rest of nature. But it can also impede our critical discernment and ethical engagement. Living in an abundantly diverse world is very different from living in one that is being plundered. “When an ecosystem is fully functioning, all the members are present at the assembly” (Snyder, 1990, p. 12). But far too many are being banished from their rightful place in the assembly: nonhuman beings and presences, people of color, the poor, to name just a few. It is crucial that we discriminate between sustainable actions that join with what is “natural” and others that go against it.

Snyder addresses such concerns by discussing the word “wild.” Scholars trace its origins to the Old English *wilde* and *wyld*. In even more ancient tongues, wilderness may have come from wild-deer-ness. All of these wild words are linked with kindred ones, including “will.” The latter helps us appreciate a core point, namely, that *wild nature has a kind of will or mind of its own, infinitely beyond our efforts to master and dominate it*. The OED (1971) provides various definitions of wild: “living in a state of nature”; “not tame, not domesticated”; “not cultivated”; “uninhabited; hence, waste, desert, desolate”; “uncivilized, savage; uncultured”; “resisting control or restraint, unruly”; “self-willed”; “passionately excited or desirous”; “fierce, savage, ferocious; furious, violent, destructive, cruel” (pp. 3776–3777). Pondering these characterizations, Snyder observes that “wild” tends to be defined by what it is *not*, according to a Euro-centered perspective. I would also point out that these cultural constructions come from a stance that separates humans from the rest of nature; that privileges control, reason, and submission to authority; and that devalues humans’ lively, felt, passionate, embodied engagement along with the spontaneously free functioning of the natural world. Wild nature certainly precedes and exceeds human will and control. We humans often detest this basic condition of our existence, as if it were an indignity, and we react by treating nature in demeaning and violent ways. In a countercultural move, Snyder (1990) asks us to ponder that which is wild from an affirmative perspective:

Of animals—free agents, each with its own endowment,
living within natural systems. . . . Of land—a place where
the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact

and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. . . . Of societies— . . . Societies whose economic system is in a close and sustainable relation to the local ecosystem. . . . Of behavior—fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. . . . Expressive, physical, openly sexual, ecstatic. (pp. 9–10)

Continuing, Snyder points out that these appreciative views of the wild

come very close to being how the Chinese define the term *Dao*, the *way* of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple. . . . In some cases we might call it sacred. It is not far from the Buddhist term *Dharma*. (p. 10)

I will draw from nearly all the preceding significations, but mostly I mean the following overlapping and interrelated faces of nature. The numbering does not indicate priority.

1. *Nature as the animals, plants, fungi, viruses, bacteria, and elemental presences of an eco-community, along with their dynamic, participatory, conversational, inter-responsive functioning.* Sometimes this will refer to the nonhuman world. Sometimes it will include human beings, culture, and society.
2. *Nature as human nature: nature as it takes form and functions in an individual, in our relations with others, and in human culture.* Human nature can include our biophysiology; genetics; instincts; sensory capacities; embodied awareness; sexuality; aggression and self-assertiveness; meaning-making abilities; feeling; thinking; language; culture; experiential awareness; creativity; intuition; death awareness; understanding, compassion, love, justice; kinship with the more-than-human world; and the inter-responsive structure, functioning, and ethical responsibility of our (co)existence. Significantly, it is

part of human nature to discover our participatory role in relation with the larger ecological and cultural communities. By designating these capacities as natural, I am not saying they are uninfluenced by culture. Ecopsychology challenges the old nature/culture binary split, and ecologists have demonstrated that culture is not limited to humankind. Think of the complex sociocultural organization of chimpanzee and Orca whale communities. Social learning plays a major role in individuals' development regarding relational interaction, hunting, nest building, group dialect, migration, and so much more. Elders teach their young about how to live well with each other in their particular home bioregion. Thus, many nonhuman animals are profoundly cultural beings. Conversely, *nature encompasses human culture*. "Civilization is part of nature" (Snyder, 1990, pp. 181–182). Almost any human quality can be expressed in a natural way, say by coming forth in consonance with the context-dependent needs of the particular individuals involved and of the whole community. *It is in our human nature to act with care for the world of nature*. But any human quality can also be distorted into unnatural, anti-natural, pathological, and pathogenic forms. Humans' presumed separation from and exploitation of the nonhuman world are not natural in the way I mean it here. Neither is global warming, racism, genocide, nuclear war, or the human-generated mass extinction of species.

3. *Nature as a convivial, inter-responsive, conversational, participatory ecological system: holistic, indivisible, dynamic, animate, sentient, sapient, loving, integrated, harmonious.*
4. *Nature as the whole earth and all-embracing cosmos in their integrated, wise, loving, dynamic, inter-responsive functioning. Humans are included here, of course.*
5. *Nature as our home: the bioregion wherein we dwell, the place where we are engaged in close contact with our intimates, the place that supports our well-being (or*

not, depending on circumstances). Note that *eco-* comes from the Greek *oikos*: home, house, dwelling place.

6. *Nature as our community*: the shared, participatory, socio-cultural, ecological fellowship of all beings and presences in a local bioregion and beyond.
7. *Nature as the deep way, order, and coherent functioning of life or being or reality*; the essential, inherent way things are and are with each other. Humans can consciously live in consonance with this way. And we can turn away from it or lose touch with it, as in the cases of individual narcissism and collective anthropocentrism.
8. *Nature as a provisional name for that which is ultimately unnamable and unfathomable*—the one great, seamless, indivisible, nondual, all-inclusive, all-permeating, participatory mystery in its complete, integrated, wise, loving, dynamic functioning: life, being, reality, God, the Dao, buddha-nature, the cosmos (by whatever name). Nothing can be separate from, outside of, excluded from, or other than this version of nature. In this specific sense, nothing is unnatural.
9. *Nature as our self*: our true self, deep self, real self, no-self, true nature, essential nature, no-nature (to use the language of mystics across various spiritual traditions). We can also call this our transpersonal self or ecological self.
10. *Nature as our conversational partner*: friend, companion, lover, mother, father, mentor, stranger, adversary, therapist, nurse, patient, benefactor (be they human or other than human).

Notice that one popular phrase is missing from the list: “the environment.” When people ask if I am an “environmentalist” or “environmental activist,” I heartily answer, “Yes!” But if things deepen into a real conversation, I go on to say that I am not fond of the term because *environ* means to surround, encircle, or encompass. The connotations are implicitly dualistic or separatist, as in “I am over here and nature is over there.” The term also suggests that nature is a mere backdrop for human

activities. And it obscures the crucial *interrelationship* transpiring between humans and the rest of nature. These views are seriously misleading, a symptom of our lost intimacy with the rest of the natural world. Nature does encompass every individual and society, no doubt. Yet nature also permeates us, comprises us, *is us* (and everyone else).

Similarly, I will use phrases such as “humankind’s relationship with the natural world.” It would be awkward, but more accurate, to say nature in human form in relationship with nonhuman nature. That is, *while humans are different from the rest of nature in significant ways, we certainly are never separate from it.* We are always involved with the natural world, indivisibly so even if unconsciously so: life keeps us breathing, we contend with a virus, we eat an apple, we build a skyscraper, we seek shelter in a hurricane, we enjoy the sweet scent of a flower. Further, from a transpersonal perspective, each of us and the whole human species is a distinctive expression of and co-creative participant in the animate earth. As etymology discloses, *a human is a being of the humus*, the earthy soil. You are nature coming forth as you. Your life is one way the earth is continuing to be and become itself.

Research Method and Evidence: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

One of my basic commitments is that the findings in this study be based upon lived experience, upon evidence that readers can consider for themselves. My experientially grounded data have been drawn from various sources: testimony from ordinary citizens, psychologists, spiritual/mystical/contemplative teachers, philosophers, poets, and nature writers; testimony from participants in empirical phenomenological-hermeneutic research that I conducted; and descriptions of encounters that have occurred in my personal life. Such evidence is always offered to draw out its psychological significance. For example, I do not present poetry strictly as poetry, but as phenomenological data. When I highlight an aspect of our relations with nature, please consider how your personal experiences resonate with, contradict, or supplement the discussion. Our current eco(psycho)logical emergency is calling for a generative collaboration among engaged citizens around the world, including contributions from specialized disciplines. Here people often think of ecology, biology, technological fields, and environmental activism. Yet equally important

are psychology, economics, education, politics, law, spirituality, and the arts. In my view, ecopsychology can make a distinctive contribution to an interdisciplinary, *psycho-cultural-spiritual* “therapy” on behalf of the truly great work of our era. This endeavor must address four synergistic dimensions: *personal experience, interpersonal relationships, the sociocultural world, and spiritual life*. Personal involvement is the primary source of all the benefits we gain from nature, and the experiential source of our care for the larger natural world. However, no one can flourish alone. Interpersonal support between friends, mentors, and other allies can make all the difference. This includes participation in small or large group initiatives like those sponsored by environmental activist organizations. Our work must also address systemic sociocultural values, structures, and forms of discourse that enhance or diminish the nature-human relationship. Economic, political, educational, and legal practices are crucial here. And whether we identify as religious or not, our spiritual life must be included in the great work.

Giving primacy to lived experience, the guiding approach of this book will be phenomenological and contemplative. Originally a distinctive movement in twentieth-century philosophy, phenomenology’s innovative contributions have been influential in existential, humanistic, psychoanalytic, and transpersonal/contemplative psychotherapy; and in the growing field of qualitative research. To invoke the heart of this approach right away, phenomenology involves “‘wonder’ in the face of the world” (p. xiii), as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) attests. The aspiration is to discover/create vivid, subtle, complex understandings of a phenomenon as it is experienced in its common lifeworld context. It is easy to quickly “understand” something in a superficial way, without really letting it speak to us and teach us something new. We can all be lured into the complacency of thinking we “get it” because we have “been there and done that.” Embracing the epistemological power of intimate attention, phenomenological inquiry is often initiated by contact with something that appears quite obvious and taken for granted. But *the significance of the obvious is rarely very obvious*. Thus, I will often point to common events and ask us to (re)consider them carefully.

Edmund Husserl (1970), the founder of phenomenological philosophy, emphasized that “we must go back to ‘the things themselves’” (p. 252), back to the way things present themselves in direct lived experience. Notice the resonance with Bashō’s (1966) contemplative guidance from the preface: “Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine”

(p. 33). Martin Heidegger studied with Husserl, built upon his work, and eventually gave phenomenology a more sociocultural and linguistic focus. Yet he continued to stress the importance of careful attunement to lived experience. In an awkward locution that is worth pondering, Heidegger (1996) said that “phenomenology” means . . . to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself” (p. 30).⁴ Yet the meanings of another’s expression are rarely easy to understand and never totally determinable. This is because complexity and subtlety pervade every significant expression; because all interpretation depends upon perspective and context, and there are always other perspectives and contexts; and because each newly developed understanding carries intimations of further significance. Therefore, Husserl stressed the importance of intentionally “bracketing” our conventional preconceptions and expectations—setting them aside as if in brackets, suspending their automatic meaning-bestowing effect (as much as possible)—so as to foster open seeing and understanding. To work phenomenologically is to be “a perpetual beginner” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiv), taking nothing for granted and inquiring freshly each time. This phenomenological attitude is quite similar to meditative awareness. As the Zen teacher Shunryū Suzuki Rōshi (1970) declared, “The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner’s mind. . . . If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything” (p. 21).

However, we are all affected by sedimented biases that come from our personal history, cultural conditioning, and native language. These preconceived views function largely unconsciously. Aware of this fact, *hermeneutic* versions of phenomenology were developed by philosophers such as Heidegger (1996) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (2011). The word *hermeneutic* is a scholarly term for the art and (human) science of interpreting qualitative data. It derives from the Greek god Hermes, whose task was to convey messages back and forth between the gods and human beings, translating them as skillfully as possible. Heidegger and Gadamer emphasized that there is no such thing as bias-free understanding. All interpretations are inevitably shaped by the interpreter’s stance. The context-laden, culturally influenced, perspectival nature of perceiving and thinking is intrinsic to the very way we understand. Thus, *hermeneutic* phenomenology is oriented by the intentional practice of catching our prejudices (as best we can) and then *placing them not aside but right in front of us for critical reflection and revision*. It is not a matter of getting rid of our prejudices but working with them consciously.

The phenomenological attitude helps cleanse our “doors of perception,” as William Blake (1988, p. 39) famously put it, thereby opening to the real alterity of the phenomenon. In a complementary manner, whatever we begin to understand needs to be held lightly and provisionally. Thus, phenomenology and hermeneutics are actually inseparable. I am sure that my preferences, privileges, and blind spots have shaped the interpretations in this book. It is an ongoing work for me to be aware of the good fortune built into my position as a White, male, middle-class university professor. A person of color or one who is economically impoverished would surely view aspects of their relationship with nature differently. For example, for calculated reasons, far more ecological degradation occurs in underprivileged communities.

A related point involves an implicit consent agreement with you as a reader. I hope you will be generous when I say “we,” “us,” and “our”—as in “our” great work of cultivating a mutually enhancing partnership with the natural world. Even when I say “I,” the reference is usually to people in general. My intention is not to make totalizing statements that level out the diversity that comprises any collective “we.” When a glorious eco-community is annihilated by mountaintop removal, I am not angry at “us” for the rapacious violence but at “them,” coal corporation executives and the political-legal system. Still, I want to appeal to the most inclusive group of allies as “we” face “our” current crisis.

I would like to call your attention to one more characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology. The work of interpretation has often been depicted as a *hermeneutic circle* or *spiral*. In presenting meaningful (and action-inspiring) stories about our relations with the rest of nature, I will show how particular constituents of the overall story are linked with each other and with the larger story as a whole. For example, two major themes will reappear in various versions throughout the book. (1) We will look critically at the suffering created by *our felt-sense of dualistic separation*: the fallacy that our self is really separate from others and the world, along with the felt-belief that we are merely sovereign, masterful, autonomous, self-sufficient, self-concerned subjects; and the associated fallacy that humankind is intrinsically separate from the rest of nature, with our supposedly exceptional species elevated to superiority and the natural world devalued and exploited. This fundamental—albeit normative—delusion of humankind generates great fear and greed. (2) We will explore *inter-responsive, interdependent, nondual (nonseparatist) alternatives to these dissociative fantasies*. This will involve an explication

of the inherently ethical structure and responsibility of human existence. By way of a hermeneutic spiral, each time we (re)consider these matters, our previous analyses will be supplemented, deepened, and carried further. I trust the intentional repetition will be freshly creative, not redundant. Rather than settling for cognitive insight, I'm hoping to foster a vital way of knowing that we feel in our blood, bones, and heart, and that we bring into our daily relationships. After all, *knowledge should be embodied as new ways of being, understanding, and loving*. This is what I mean by a transformation of consciousness, one of ecopsychology's crucial tasks.

The Emergence and Development of Ecopsychology

Before ecopsychology came onto the scene in the 1990s, there were only occasional psychological inquiries into the relationship between humans and the natural world. Without trying to be exhaustive, I would like to acknowledge a few significant examples. The most famous psychologist ever, Sigmund Freud, was critical of cultural and intrapsychic forces that exerted excessive control over the natural body-based drives and passions of the so-called "id." But he also inherited a modernist ethos of separation, domination, and exploitation regarding the natural world. Freud (2010) thus advocated for an "attack against nature and subjecting her to the human will" (p. 45). In contrast, in *Gestalt Therapy*, a 1951 text that founded a new humanistic psychotherapy, Paul Goodman and Fritz Perls presciently expressed concern that "there are disturbances that may be called neurotic that occur in the organism/natural-environment field, for instance . . . our contemporary disease of 'mastering' nature rather than living symbiotically" (Perls et al., 1951, p. 355). Paul Shepard, an ecologist with deep psychological insight, also did sustained work in this area. He stressed that "if man's environmental crisis signifies a crippled state of consciousness as much as it does damaged habitat, then that is perhaps where we should begin" (Shepard, 1973, p. xvi).

The field of "environmental psychology" began to emerge in the 1960s, with an interest in how contact with nature contributes to the psychological health of humans. Rachel and Stephen Kaplan (1989; 1998) are notable researchers in this field, with a series of influential publications focusing on the restorative benefits of experiences with the natural world. The word "ecopsychology" (and the interdisciplinary field by the same name) were originated by the cultural historian and countercultural

critic Theodore Roszak. He was chief editor of *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (Roszak et al., 1995), a landmark anthology that made our relations with nature a respected theme of psychological research and psychotherapeutic inquiry. Roszak (1995) was one of the first to emphasize that “*ecology needs psychology, psychology needs ecology*. The context for defining sanity in our time has reached planetary magnitude” (p. 5). Andy Fisher’s *Radical Ecopsychology* (2013), with its insightful integration of theoretical and clinical perspectives, helped carry the field further. As Fisher says, “Ecopsychologists argue that genuine sanity is grounded in the reality of the natural world; that the ecological crisis signifies a pathological break from this reality; and that the route out of our crisis must therefore involve, among other things, a psychological reconciliation with the living earth (p. xiii). In a series of profoundly illuminating works, the psychotherapist and ecopsychologist Jeff Beyer (1999) presented an in-depth, nondual phenomenology of “experiencing the self as being part of nature” (p. 5). “Why are we apparently so willing to push it to the very edge of catastrophe? . . . Perhaps we are in denial about being ‘in’ the world. . . . The central, most fundamental, and most pathogenic problem in our relating with nature is that we like to think of ourselves as being ‘apart from it’ rather than as being ‘a part of it’” (Beyer, 2014, p. 199). Thankfully, as we will see, scholars from disciplines other than psychology have also made major contributions to ecopsychology. A particularly noteworthy text is Warwick Fox’s (1990) *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*. Building upon Arne Naess’ “deep ecology,” Fox articulates a transpersonal foundation for ecophilosophy. While I will not draw explicitly from the deep ecologists, their keen insights are thoroughly consonant with our present work.

Transpersonal (Eco)Psychology and Contemplative/Mystical Spirituality

Advancing a *transpersonal* and *contemplative* approach to ecopsychology is the most distinctive contribution of this book. Transpersonal psychology is a subfield of psychology devoted to understanding experiences, modes of consciousness, senses of self, and ways of relating with others that go beyond (*trans-*) our personal, ego-centered identity and ways of being. Transpersonal psychology is sometimes called spiritual or contemplative psychology, since the phenomena it studies have traditionally been asso-