

Human Nature: Locating Ourselves

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“The air was filled with the low sound of falling leaves, as they made their hesitant way to earth, adding little by little to a variegated carpet already ankle deep. And as they came spinning, floating, and spiralling down like golden snowflakes, the sound of their continuous, subdued, rustling transformed the stately forest into a shadowed, whispering gallery, in which it seemed as though the ancient trees would tell in muted accents the age-old secrets of days gone by, did one but have the ears to understand.” - Grey Owl (1931; 113)

I am human. I am nature. My eyes are the stars. My hair is the grass that grows in fields and valleys. My mouth, the canyons and crevices that score the land. My ears are caves in which the creatures dwell. My jaw and chin are mountainous ranges. My chest is the expanse of this world. My skin, the crusty tundra that cracks and shifts. My heart is the sun. My veins are the rivers and streams. My blood is the water. My lungs are the oceans, vast reservoirs. My organs are the lakes and ponds. My fingers and toes are the great trees that provide shelter. My breath is the wind. My thoughts are the clouds. My voice is the sunshine. I am the world, the world is me.

What distinction can we make between our bodies and the natural environment in which we find ourselves? Are we not comprised of the same elements? What is human nature, what of nature is human? When you walk what do you feel under you? When you look unto the world, what do you see? The world is our home. When we distance ourselves from the environment, we believe that we are looking at something separate (Mest, 2008; 61), rather than looking inward and recognizing something within us. Having said that, how do we identify with our

environments and how do we see ourselves? Where are we, and what location do we create for ourselves? Self-concept has a great deal to do with social work practice, and further, the study of globalization. What this paper will venture to discover is why we have separated ourselves from our human nature, from our home on earth and what can be done to acknowledge our various locations as they exist within us, among us and around us.

Connections to Nature

Whether in news media or through our own observations, we are continuously provided with evidence of how we are harming the environment (Schultz, 2004; 31). Pollution is the most visible form of the destruction that we impart on nature, but what about the continued disrespect that we have perpetuated, the emotional harm that we are doing to the planet? Mayer and McPherson Frantz note that “we abuse land because we see it as a commodity that belongs to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (2004; 504). We take advantage of the environment because we do not acknowledge our connection to it. Mayer and McPherson Frantz used an intervention called the ‘Connectedness to Nature Scale’ where participants were asked to respond with their agreement or disagreement with such statements as “I often feel a sense of oneness with the natural world around me”, “I recognize and appreciate the intelligence of other living organisms”, “I often feel disconnected from nature”, “Like a tree can be part of a forest, I feel embedded within the larger natural world” and “My personal welfare is independent of the welfare of the natural world” (2004; 513).

Reflection on such statements can provide considerable insight, and opportunity for self-knowledge. If one were to state that they didn’t feel connected to nature, why not? If they were

to feel embedded in natural systems, why? Part of this issue is cultural, for all people were raised to believe different things. Part of it is visceral though, as Mazis states: “The perceived threat of animality at the heart of our biology and psyche in previous centuries was a central justification for the increasing control offered by rational human ‘progress’” (2007; 126). What do we have to fear? What do we have to lose in acknowledging our equal place in harmony with nature? We lose that superiority, that control and the power that comes along with it. What we must begin to consider though is that no matter what we may do, we will always exist here on earth. The primary caveat with that is that if we damage the environment enough, there will be no more land to support us as a species. We will walk like lemmings off the cliff of our own greed. We need to open our minds to the possibility of engaging the environment not as a slave, but an equal friend and partner in our existence. Aldo Leopold, in the *Sand County Almanac* explains the importance of adhering to the concept of the land ethic. “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (Mazis, 2007; 125). We must find our place in our community, and acknowledge all of the systems that contribute to our location there.

(Social) Location

So if the earth is our home, and scholars like Aldo Leopold have suggested that we place ourselves in community with nature, how do we then start to understand our locations? Much literature has been written on the now accepted term ‘social location’. Evans and Kelley describe what many believe, that social location is a personal explanation of how one fits into the hierarchy of society (2004; 3). I must disagree with this definition, though. We must be willing to escape compartmentalizing ourselves into hierarchies. We limit ourselves by being situated on

a higher/lower spectrum, where we are defined by our possibilities and potentialities. I would argue, in support of Leopold, that we should expand our definition of location to the society that we have with all the people, creatures, plants and land that supports us. In searching for a definition of the word 'social' in multiple dictionaries, no statement exclusively privileges 'social' as being a strictly human concept.

I would like to now move to my own location, which incorporates a number of social work concepts, theories and will hopefully bridge the gap between our abstract discussion of locations and the practical processes that we find ourselves engaged in.

Who Am I, What Am I, Where Am I, Why Am I?

The name that was given to me is Andrew Howard Snowball. Howard is the name of my paternal grandfather. Snowball is the name of my ancestors from England. My skin colour is commonly called white, a social status and privilege marker assigned to me. I am a male, also a privilege marker, as opposed to those that identify as female or as having multiple genders. I locate myself in Canada, more specifically in Ontario. I do not fully consider myself Canadian, though this is a privilege label that has been placed upon me legally. Guelph is the place where I was born, Erin is where I was raised and Ontario is where I have spent almost all of my life. I am a brother of four young men named Matthew, Sean, Adam and Eric. I am a son to Bruce and Lorraine. I was raised by parents who would be called lower middle-class, by their socio-economic standing. My father worked for a multi-national corporation, my mother called herself a home-maker. I have had relatively few lasting ailments, I am privileged for this. I also locate myself in my opportunities. I am engaged in one of the highest levels of formal education possible, and I have come to know myself most intimately within my time in this system. I am an academic.

Even though I currently reside in a sub-urban community called Mississauga, I identify myself very strongly with the natural world, having grown up in a rural environment. I am most comfortable in the forest, surrounded by the trees; I look at them as representations of purpose and achievement. A friend told me once that the reason we feel most comfortable in the forest is because the trees are our ancestors. I appreciated this. Trees are strong, they are homes for many creatures and the providers of shade and also nourishment. Many cultures respect trees for their uses, but also for their mere existence. I locate myself in this place where I am as a tree, spreading roots and reaching towards the sky. I am a tree when I provide fruit and blossoms for others to use and appreciate. I am a tree as I develop bark, sometimes knotted and sometimes smooth. I am a tree when I lose my leaves in the annual cycle of growth and renewal. I am a tree because trees are alive and they are just like me.

Who am I?: I'm Andrew. What am I?: I'm a tree. Where am I?: I am here. Why am I?: Because others came before me.

There is a certain amount of humility necessary for accepting these things that I have said. If we are to truly take stock of what the authors have said above, we need to acknowledge that we are but humble vessels for life and knowledge in the greater scheme of this world. We only have life because it has been given to us, and we only know what we have been told or shown. To know this is to be both fulfilled and unfulfilled at the same time. We can never know everything at once, or perhaps even anything at all. This leaves many people struggling for direction and a solid place in which to stand. If we can look at ourselves as trees though, we actually never move, we exist in a space that is totally our own, influenced by the many others that walk past us, sit under us, or pick our fruit.

Being at Home in Our Human Nature

I don't want to go any further until I acknowledge the work of Ryan A. Mest, a scholar from the Pittsburgh area. His article on the 'transformative power of home' has grounded my own assumptions about this topic. Here I will briefly explain his thoughts and concepts. Mest calls himself an ecopsychologist (I will define ecopsychology later). In his analysis, Mest explains that the prefix *eco-* comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which roughly translated means home or a place of belonging (2007; 52,53). A coincidence, I'm sure. Mest reasons that:

“The word *home* reminds me of the place from which I've come, the place where I find myself as I have been and will be and indeed am. Home holds my comforts, my struggles, my cares and my longings. Perhaps, more than anything else, home reminds me, as I write, of the relationships that I bear everyday and constitute my experience of the world” (2007; 52).

Home is not just a place though; it can be a process of coming to being, as Mest continues:

“The home often appears in psychotherapy as a natural part of the client or patient's narrative. Reflection often revolves around the meanings of and responses to the question 'Where (in what way, or how) do you find yourself?' To find oneself in any way or state of being often involves a story of how one arrived at this place” (2007; 53).

If we accept these statements even only on a cursory level, we can see that there are many systems and processes that interact with our being, most of them not of our own control. Think of what fear and panic we exhibit when 'natural disasters' (a distasteful term in itself) happen. We see a tornado pick up a building and destroy it instantly, or a tsunami ravage a coastal community, and we remember the power of nature. If these are the only ways that the earth as a home is acknowledged, we will remain distant from discovering our true nature.

The earth presents itself selflessly as the home for all things; it is the cradle of all life. If one were to look pragmatically and dispassionately at this issue, it is clear that we are at home here in our environment. It is in our homes that we will find our human nature. We live in houses, often called homes, which are built of natural materials or materials synthetically

produced from natural materials. We populate our home with ‘pets’ (another distasteful term), plants, and food. Each of these things is of the earth. Our roads are paved upon the land, and our conveyances were built from natural materials as well. Many people identify with their possessions, but I am here to say that those possessions are of the earth as well. Everything we’ve ever had, everyone we’ve ever known, and everything we’ve ever done has been here, on the land. All the processes and systems that we engage in are housed here on earth.

Another convincing argument here is the evidence provided by the many people who choose to live with animals or observe them in their natural environment. As Mazis noted earlier, there is something that draws us to animals. They are like us, but at the same time not like us. Some vegetarians restrict their diet because they feel intense compassion for the creatures that they would eat. I would ask though, does that stalk of corn not have as much life and livelihood as the cow that receives our reverential and preferential treatment? Again, we connect to animals; we recognize that they live in the wild and that we domesticate them. Animals become our family members, and we speak to them as though they understand us. Would it be a stretch then, for this same person to look at the world around them as alive and being just like them? If that animal is so alike to you, why is that stalk of corn not deserving of the same care and compassion?

I acknowledge that this is a stretch for many, but it certainly is possible. There are many simple ways in which one can connect to the environment, whether by walking in the woods or meditating. In his 1996 text, Abram suggests using meditation to centre oneself and connect to the outer world through inner focus (Mest, 2007; 69). This is not probable for everyone, and given the choice many individuals will continue to turn their backs on the humanness of nature and the natural gifts that we continue to take for granted. I can’t hope to influence them in this

proposal, or social workers in general, I can only impact the one reader in my audience, you. I have tried to use these facts and logic to express the benefit for us as helping practitioners to move beyond what we think we know and to begin to locate ourselves in the global context of our lives. Perhaps I can call this a proposal in support of globalization, a process of coming to respect the world.

Globalization Re-Imagined

In her article *Globalization and Social Work: International and Local Implications*, Karen Lyons shares the widely held perspective that globalization is a collection of economic and commercial processes that are impacted or influenced by each population's relative standard of living and environmental circumstances (2006; 365). I might argue that the last point she raises has more bearing than all the others, in fact, without our environment, commerce would not exist. Our standard of living is intimately tied to what our environment does or does not provide for us. Lyons does try to recover however, noting that 'globalization has been explored in different spheres than merely economical processes' (2006; 367). These processes are the ones that concern social workers most, the lived issues relating to globalization. We wholeheartedly acknowledge the human difficulties that create and are created by processes of global expansion and control, but apart from environmental advocacy, what part does nature have to play in our practice? If globalization can be re-imagined to mean a comprehension of the earth, an understanding of its magnitude and majesty, we might inch ever closer to discovering our human nature.

In this way, migration has a special role to play in coming to know earth as it really is. Lyons notes that "interdependence, or 'inter-connectedness', is a concept that has been explored

by writers in the field of migration” (2006; 367). When one moves from one environment to another, a change takes place. When someone comes to Canada from an African or Caribbean nation, they would certainly notice a change in weather come winter time. To be able to cross the globe, and experience life in those two places is to hold a special knowledge. This comprehension can then stimulate the growth of new knowledge and mixed perspectives among the current and recently arrived residents (Abu-Laban, 2001; 263). This conversation cannot be had solely between two parties though, for as Abu-Laban speaks to the concept of ‘a politics of recognition’, she says: “A truly meaningful politics of recognition can only develop from an ongoing dialogue amongst individuals and groups who are equals” (2001; 273). The environment is both the context and conduit of the knowledge transfer that takes place in a politics of recognition. At this point in time though, nature does not have equal status or opportunity to engage these parties on a level that could be called equitable or fair. This is where we, as advocates, can realize our compassionate potential. Ecopsychology and eco-spiritual social work are two branches of the helping profession that are beginning to realize the importance of fostering a politics of recognition with nature.

Ecopsychology

Ecopsychology, as promised, is a branch of psychology concerned with the connections that people establish with nature and the natural world. “The subject matter of ecopsychology is neither the human nor the natural, but the lived experience of interrelationship between the two, whether the ‘nature’ in question be human or nonhuman” (Fisher, 2002; 31). Lester Brown, a renowned ecopsychologist shares that “ecopsychologists believe there is an emotional bond between human beings and the natural environment out of which we evolve” (1995; xvi). So,

from the first quote, we have determined that ecopsychology is indeed concerned with the human nature connection, and Brown contributes that this connection is an inherently emotional one. As a profession “ecopsychology brings together the sensitivity of therapists, the expertise of ecologists, and the ethical energy of environmental activists” (Brown, 1995; xvi).

There remains a perspective amongst clinicians and scientists especially though, that if something is not rooted in fact or is not evidence based, it is not valid. To the fact-adhering clinician, ecopsychology deals with intangibles, unprovables and abstract concepts. I would consider this field to be essential though, and would categorize it as applied and functional practice (that is only if we can agree that the environment is an important part of our lives and also that it may or may not be our home).

There is no debating that as a society, our consciousness of the environment and its issues has come a long way, especially in the last generation (Brown, 1995; xiii). The applied worth of ecopsychology is derived from its genesis in psychology. James Hillman notes that psychology is concerned with discovering or uncovering the ego, ‘the where, what, why, how and who of me’ (1995; xvii). Hillman goes on to note that ‘the barrier between self and the environment is personal and arbitrary’ (1995; xiv).

“The notion of nature has been ideologically perverted precisely because it is so powerful, so very much at the heart of it all, so decisive in how we understand and behave in the world. Stronger still, it is because our society so poorly acknowledges and understands the nature of things that we continue to grossly mistreat them...” (Fisher, 2002; 93).

Eco-Spiritual Social Work

Coates, Gray and Hetherington posit that “cross-cultural, anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice have made headway, as these approaches have enabled social work to look carefully at its own

practices...” (2006; 382). Is this enough though? What role does spirituality have in social work practice? As stated earlier, we as social workers have the agency to contribute directly and indirectly to the lives of the many and diverse clients that we meet. In this way we are responsible to fairly mitigate the growing global consciousness. Like the concept of migration addressed earlier, Earley (1997) speaks to global consciousness as a process ‘which involves the recognition of the importance of other people and of other species to the global community’ (Coates, 2006; 392). Spirituality and people’s varied spiritual beliefs have long been a taboo subject in social work theory and practice, though Gray has begun to challenge that, stating:

“The literature on spirituality in social work, in which the influence of New Age spirituality is strongly evident, tries to re-instate our search for quality and meaning. However, social work has yet to examine the broader sociological theory and the way in which it can deepen our understanding of the rise of spirituality in social work” (Gray, 2008; 175).

This search for meaning has a great deal to do with how we see ourselves in our environment as well. Spirituality as a process, usually exclusively concerned with individuals’ finding of meaning in life “can also be linked to the failures of modernity and its depersonalizing and alienating effects through the detraditionalization and secularization of society, the rise of science, rationality, the professions, and industrial progress, and the decline in religion” (Gray, 2008; 192).

If we, as helpers, cannot look directly at the environment as not only our place of being, but also the backbone of our very existence, how can we effectively meet clients where they are if they hold these beliefs? A person’s search for meaning is paramount, there is nothing greater. In searching for themselves, our clients are vulnerable, and we are charged with cradling them in their fragility. “Within our profession there is a wealth of experience, an accumulated knowledge base, and superior skills, which may be used in the service of empowering those who are

exploited in the global economy” (Polack, 2004; 289). Powell and Geoghegan explore the concept of ‘trust as symbolic practice’ in their 2005 article, where trust is ‘constructed through principles of equality’ (142). Trust is a significant emotion in the search for our human nature, where we trust in nature to protect and provide for us. We trust each other. What is the difference, though, between trust and faith? As practitioners, we must take the concept of trust and apply it liberally to our clients, to our shared environment, and to ourselves.

Moving Inward: Finding Our Human Nature

First and foremost, what has kept us from finding our human nature? Doubt. Beck (1992) sees modernization as the process that leads people towards self-doubt (Gray, 2008; 182). What is modernization other than an escape from nature? We are running as far away from our environment as we can in order to fully realize our potential. This, for me, does not compute. But, if we are to follow this analogy, and we continue with our process of modernity, where are we modernizing? Here on earth. We cannot escape our human nature, it is here for us, waiting to be found. Still that doubt persists though.

“Giddens (1991) points out, cultural changes in late-modern societies have led to ‘crises of personal identity’ when ‘individuals find themselves in a constant state of self-questioning as they learn that knowledge has no (religious) foundation’ (Gray, 2008; 182). So, where then can we find the answers that we so desire? Literally, the answer is beneath us, and figuratively, that is why we refuse to acknowledge it. We have perpetuated this fallacy of advancement so far that we cannot even recognize where we came from. Social work professes to be the leader in the social justice movement (Polack, 2004; 281), but maintains a disconnect from nature. Finding our human nature “requires that we have a sense of our deep connection to all beings—a

compassionate awareness that our individual and collective actions are intimately linked, and can be constructively linked to the well-being of others” (Coates, 2006; 392).

We locate ourselves as people, who have knowledge and possessions. We locate ourselves as having fear, love, compassion, strength and weakness. We locate ourselves as having a human nature, but can we actually explain what that human nature is? Is it who we are, or how we act? Or is it where we come from? I have told you who I am, and where I come from. It is now up to you to find yourself in your environment. We are all on paths of self-discovery, but for all of our walking outwards, we must begin to walk inwards and acknowledge that:

We are human. We are nature.

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