Diamond in the Rough:

An Exploration of Aliveness and Transformation in Wilderness

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Abstract

Most ecopsychologists recognize the importance of spirituality in human-nature relationships. This chapter describes one example of a practice oriented to the spiritual and transpersonal dimensions of ecopsychology, "Diamond in the Rough" retreats. These wilderness retreats are grounded in immediate experience, optimistic about human nature, and oriented to the natural world as a source of support, healing, insight, and transformation. Combining the "primitive ecopsychology" approach of Steven Foster, Meredith Little, and the School of Lost Borders with the Diamond Approach of A. H. Almaas, they demonstrate several elements relevant to a transpersonal approach to ecopsychology: open and open-ended phenomenological inquiry into immediate experience, the three-stage structure of rites of passage as a container to deepen experience, the Four Shields (or four directions) model of nature including human nature, and most importantly, direct encounter with the natural world. The Four Shields model suggests four aspects of human nature (body, heart, mind, and spirit) and a number of capacities associated with each (e.g., instinctual vitality, self-reflection and wounding, rationality and will, and freedom and transformation), and the Diamond Approach identifies four aspects of individual consciousness or soul (dynamism, sensitivity, maturation, and potentiality). These retreats apply the correspondences between these two systems in the service of greater aliveness and freedom of experience. This chapter aims to provide a more precise understanding of the spiritual and transpersonal dimensions of ecopsychology and a concrete example which embodies this understanding.

Keywords: ecopsychology, transpersonal psychology, Diamond Approach, Almaas, rites of passage, wilderness experience

Standing on a rise at the north end of a long, narrow desert valley, I feel a light wind off the mountains behind me, and the full length of the valley sweeps away below me. Though my legs are weak, standing seems the proper posture for such a view. It's October in the Mojave—hot days, cold nights. I have been alone for the past four days, intentionally fasting from food and drinking only water. With the end of the fourth day approaching, I have prepared for an all-night vigil. This is a ceremony, and its structure draws from the same deep well as many cultures' rites of passage. I'm part of a small dedicated group which has come together, each with our own purposes and with the support of expert, experienced guides, but with the arrival of the last night of my solo, my aloneness is growing.

As the sun pauses for a moment on the western mountains, I put my sleeping bag, ground pad, and water bottle into the small circle of stones I have made. It is not quite big enough for me to stretch out in, in hopes of discouraging sleep. Slowly, I take off my clothes and put them in, too. I whisper a prayer for strength through the night and repeat my wish for clarity and confirmation about my place in the world as I move into a new phase of my adulthood. As the sun slips below the horizon, I bow and step into the circle. Once in the circle, I quickly put my clothes back on; it is cold now, desert-night cold, alone cold. I aim to stay awake here all night.

I have fasted alone like this several times before, and I value this work deeply. This time is different, however. I have deliberately set higher goals for myself. Not knowing exactly what I need, I sense that the more I can let go, the more I will get out of it. My mantra the last four days has been "dig deeper." Another difference is symbolized by going naked into the circle. In the past, I went into my vigils with my journal, meditation beads, flute, chants, and other tools for awakening. To be completely honest, I should add “tools for occupying my time.” This time I leave all that behind, taking only what I need for safety during the night. Going naked represents my intention to simply be here. In parallel, my intention for the solo has been getting simpler the past few days, as if the sun, wind, hunger, boredom, awe, and all the rest have been forcing me to release my wishes and hopes until nothing but the bare bones of my intention remain. The question I couldn’t quite voice before goes something like this: “Do I have what I need to live my life?”

Stars appear in the east, and the blue in the west deepens. Shooting stars leave brilliant neon trails and delight me. I sit in my circle for a while, and when my legs get tired I move around the circle in a slow, shuffling dance. At first, I have lots of energy, but as the night sets in, I find myself more tired. I move and stretch often during the first part of the night. I try meditating, but my mind will not cooperate. To do something with the incessant thinking, I decide I will give my mind something useful to do—or at least something it’s good at. I’ll do calculations. The waxing quarter moon has been up for some time. I measure various angles with my outstretched arms and, according to some formula I can't remember now, I figure that when the moon sets, dawn will be just a couple hours away. Judging from how high the moon is in the night sky, dawn will not be long now. I settle down for the remaining few hours of night with a sense of completion and satisfaction. “This hasn’t been too bad,” I think to myself with relief.

It is a struggle to stay awake, but I am working hard at it. I spend my time sitting for brief periods, shuffling or jumping up and down to stay warm and awake. I count more shooting stars, hum softly to myself, and focus on my breathing. Then, at one point, the world stops. There is a timeless moment of total stillness and silence, deep, velvety black, and peaceful. Unlike sleep, I am conscious of the stillness, aware of the lack of mental activity other than this bare recognition. The moment feels total, complete, and pure.

Soon enough, that boundless stillness is replaced by more mental activity. For example, I find myself going around to my favorite restaurants ordering meals. It doesn't matter that the food never comes. ("I'll have samosas for an appetizer, chicken masala, onion naan, and a mango lassi. … How about a Swiss cheeseburger with slaw and extra tomato, fries, and a beer? … Rice and steamed veggies, water to drink, no ice, please.") I marvel at what a hungry mind comes up with.

My time calculations have been off, however. When I figure dawn is just over the horizon, the night is still deepening. The night has been much longer than I had planned. I am having a hell of a time staying awake and focused. My mind runs around like crazy. My body aches. I am almost too tired to move, but I know if I stop for more than a minute I will drop off to sleep. I need my sleeping bag for warmth, but it threatens to seduce me into sleep. This is no longer on a sacred vigil for a vision but just a struggle to stay in my circle and stay awake. Time seems have stopped again but not in a peaceful way. It should be dawn by now! I seriously consider the possibility that some crazy cosmic catastrophe has brought the world into continuous night and the dawn will never come. Yes, *seriously*. I pound the ground groaning, and then I shuffle around some more.

Finally, finally, however, the dark in the east softens almost imperceptibly. I breathe a sigh of relief, and I find I am crying. Finally, the sun breaks the horizon. I whoop with joy, throw my arms up in prayer to the sun and the others in the group, and take a moment before stepping outside my circle. I feel great relief but also an odd hint of disappointment and even defeat. Now, though, it is time to pack my stuff and disappear my circle. Activity fills me, and the feeling of disappointment fades. The guides who stayed at basecamp greet me with clear eyes, simple ceremony, and hugs. It truly feels good to be in their company again and to see the others. I am quiet and open, and the warm sun is delicious. The food tastes exquisite, of course. "Oh yes! Fresh fruit and a cup of herb tea." I also offer prayers for those who are hungry this morning without choice and pause to give thanks.

The next two days, I spend much of my time listening to others' stories as my teachers work with them. I am not talking much about my experiences. Since I will be around for another week, they focus on those who need to return to their daily lives sooner. However, in quiet moments, my sense of failure is growing. I am feeling dread at the thought that I may have wasted a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Instead of going into a profound mystical state or opening myself to some life-changing insight, I just shuffled around thinking about food and trying to get comfortable. The skies never opened to reveal *capital-T Truth*, no animals whispered my name, and I struggled. Something especially grates on me about not having been graceful throughout the night. In that darkness, I let go of anything subtle or esoteric, and I just scratched around in the dirt, waiting for the night to end. I groveled in my little circle. Now, I catch the stench of old shame, the shame of being insignificant and needy, the shame that my time in the ceremony had been pointless.

It is now the third morning following my fast, and I am sleeping in the sage flats outside of the little desert town where my teachers live. My campsite is just a patch of bare ground surrounded by low bushes, so plain and so beautiful. Songbirds flit through the bushes, and I have a stunning view of the mountains across the valley. Waking in the cool air before dawn, a very strong sense slips in through the open door of this twilight—crystal clear and sharp as a rising sun. I get it! The simple, undeniable fact is that I did everything I set out to do on my ceremony. I went into my circle on the fourth night of a solo fast in the desert, I stayed awake in that circle through the night, and I stepped back out of that circle at dawn. No long involved story and no dramatic emotional catharsis; just a simple, certain truth.

However simple or obvious it might be, its impact on me is profound. Still in my sleeping bag, I feel buoyed up as if held in some greater arms. How can I continue to deny my own capacity? I was truly exposed in that circle. It was hard, I struggled, and I did what I set out to do. Rather than pride in a conquering achievement, I feel humble and grateful, as if these events have taken place *through* me, not *from* me. My heart is extraordinarily relaxed and whole. Lying there in the sage flats, taking in the cool air, and watching the dawn, a sense of fullness grows in me: *This* is enough. This moment is complete, and I am part of it. A passage from Castaneda's *Tales of Power* comes to mind in which the *brujo* Don Juan tells his student Carlos:

> You say you need help. Help for what? You have everything needed for the extravagant journey that is your life. I have tried to teach you that the real experience is to be a man [sic] and that what counts is being alive; life is the little detour that we are taking now. Life in itself is sufficient, self-explanatory, and complete. (Castaneda 1974, 59)

Reflecting on this experience, I see that my hopes and idealizations dissolved there in the unbounded, eternal darkness and struggle of that desert night. My deeply held, and largely unconscious, ideals of grace in the face of distress have been driven by my internalized admonitions against being needy or burdening others. This, in turn, had kept me from a deeper sense of my own capacity. Yet, on my vigil, all that cracked open, and what emerged was my actual experience. I had faced what I had been avoiding. My defenses had been ground down, I wallowed in my needs, and yet I had fulfilled my intention for that ceremony. I did what I set out to do; gracefulness be damned! My aliveness is big enough to include groveling, too. I now had an answer to the question which emerged in my solo. "Do I have what I need to live my life?" Yes, I do. I confirmed it in the ceremony of my solo vigil. Beyond the images and hopes, it is enough to be alive and awake in the singular and unique circle of my life.

Meanwhile, the sun's warmth releases smells of the sage, and it's time now for breakfast. "Ah, granola with almonds and raisins and a cup of green tea."

This chapter describes a confluence of two streams, the primitive ecopsychology at the heart of my solo desert vigil and the Diamond Approach, a spiritual teaching and path which draws on spiritual wisdom, depth psychology, and personal inquiry and with which I have a similarly deep and personal connection. These have come together in wilderness retreats I call "Diamond in the Rough," and I believe they serve as an example of one important approach to ecopsychology.

Ecopsychology

Enduring psychological and spiritual questions—who we are, how we grow, why we suffer, how we heal—are intimately connected to our relationships with the physical world. Similarly, predominant environmental questions of our time—the sources of, consequences of, and solutions to environmental disaster—are rooted in our views of our place in relation to nature. Ecopsychology integrates ecology and psychology in responding to both sets of questions. Among its contributions are articulating and promoting the value of phenomenological and sensorial connections with the natural world; shifting the basis for environmental action from anxiety, blame, and coercion to devotion, joy, and invitation; bringing the natural world and ecological thinking to psychotherapy and personal development; and critically examining the mechanistic orientation of modern culture in order to foster ways of living which are ecologically, psychologically, and culturally healthy and sustainable (Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner 1995; Roszak 2001; Kahn and Hasbach 2012). At the heart of these themes is ecopsychology's call for the broadening and deepening of self-identity to include other beings, the natural world, and the cosmos (see, for example, Beyer, Chap. 8 in this volume). Expanding our identity promotes self-transcendence, self-realization, and full psychological maturity and at the same time, attitudes and behaviors which support both short-term and long-term environmental health (Davis and Canty 2013).

While the views underlying ecopsychology are ancient, the field of ecopsychology developed explicitly in the 1990s with the work of Theodore Roszak, Mary Gomes, Allen Kanner, and Robert Greenway. Many of its early expressions concentrated on exposing the reasons for our dangerous and harmful disconnection with nature and proposing avenues for restoration of a caring relationship with the natural world. For example, Fisher (2002) saw ecopsychology as an evolving project for radical change toward serving the whole of life through psychology, philosophy, critical theory, and healing practices. Ecopsychologists call for a shift in worldview and practice that will reembed our individual human psyches into the natural world. Ecopsychology also found expression in the context of psychotherapy in the form of ecotherapy. Ecotherapy suggests that environmental damage is a source of personal emotional pain and seeks, among other things, to provide a means for working with grief, rage, and anxiety in response to environmental devastation and loss. Rather than treating such responses solely as psychological disorders, an ecotherapist may help a client experience these feelings and find a useful expression for them.

At the same time, the healing properties of direct contact with the natural world were being integrated into the human potential movement by Greenway (1995), Foster and Little (1989a, b), and others. While environmental psychologists were documenting some of the psychological, cognitive, and physiological benefits of contact with nature (e.g., Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich, 1984), early ecopsychologists tended to focus on wilderness experiences, ritual, indigenous peoples' nature spirituality, and an animistic view that the Earth is alive and sentient, all in service of profound personal and spiritual growth. Thomas Doherty (2009), founding editor of the journal *Ecopsychology,* identified these views—the critique of modern culture, the search for new approaches to environmental action, dealing with environmental grief and anxiety, and cultivation of psychospiritual growth in nature—as representing ecopsychology's first generation.

A second generation of ecopsychology has recently emerged with a stronger focus on research and therapeutic practice. The *Ecopsychology* journal was established in 2009, providing a forum for scholarly research and inquiry focused on the relationship of human and planetary well-being, the *European Journal of Ecopsychology* followed in 2010, and a number of innovative research projects on ecotherapy and integrations of environmental action and restoration with psychological healing and growth have emerged in recent years (Buzzell and Chalquist 2007; Kahn and Hasbach 2012). This work is bringing ecopsychological concepts into evidence-based practice to promote healing and effective approaches to environmental sustainability. Doherty (2009) has suggested that as ecopsychology moves into this second generation of research, theory, and application, it is becoming less defined by its countercultural, holistic, and romantic stance and more self-reflective, pluralistic, and pragmatic. Importantly, Doherty called for an expansion from those early foundations of ecopsychology but not a rejection of them.

Clearly, ecopsychology is a field that is growing and evolving. Peter Kahn and Patricia Hasbach (2012) provide an overview of the dominant orientations in ecopsychology, and Hasbach (2012) proposes expanding this list toward a “revisioning” of ecopsychology. Several of these ecopsychological orientations are notable for the work described in this chapter:

- *Phenomenology*, by which “direct sensorial experiences with the phenomenon of nature constitute a foundational source of knowledge, joy, and a full realization of human potential” (p. 119)
- *Transpersonal*, including “interaction with nature [that] helps lead to optimal mental health and psychological development, often through developing inner peace,

compassion, and trust and by providing a medium for engaging in selfless service" (p. 120)

- *Wildness*, that "to flourish, we need to connect more deeply to wildness" (p. 123-124) and further that "wildness exists not just 'out there' in relation to the external natural world but within" (p. 124)

I agree that these orientations are important for ecopsychology, though as Hasbach makes clear, they are only part of this field. Other influential ecopsychologists have also placed spiritual concerns at the heart of ecopsychology (Fox 1995; Roszak 2001; Fisher 1992; Buzzell and Chalquist 2007, section 5; Snell et al. 2011). They are also at the core of the Diamond in the Rough retreats.

Empirical support for the value of contact with nature is growing at an enormous rate with an extraordinary degree of consistency across research paradigms and theoretical views. Research on the psychological benefits of nature experiences comes from a variety of research paradigms, including case studies, narrative content analysis, surveys, quasi-experiments, randomized-design experiments, and qualitative-phenomenological studies, and from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including neuropsychology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology, depth psychology, and transpersonal psychology. The varieties of exposure to the natural world in this research is similarly broad, including looking at photographs and videos, being in a room with plants or a window with a view of trees, living in an apartment building with trees nearby, taking brief walks in urban green spaces, gardening, having contact with animals, exercising outdoors, and taking extended wilderness trips. This research demonstrates the positive impacts of nature on attention and cognitive restoration, relaxation and stress reduction, problem solving and creativity, emotional well-being and self-esteem, and prosocial values and behaviors, among other outcomes. Reviews of portions of this work can be found in Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan (2008); Davis (2011); Selhub and Logan (2012).

More relevant to my focus here is research showing that nature is the most common trigger for peak experiences (Wuthnow 1978) and awe (Shiota et al. 2007) and one of the most common "spiritual practices" felt by respondents to be beneficial to mental health, just after prayer, meditation, and religious services (Lukoff and Mancuso ND). Other research shows that wilderness experiences promote spiritual experiences (e.g., Stringer and McAvoy 1992; Frederickson and Anderson 1999). However, such extraordinary and transcendent experiences are only one aspect of nature experiences. Boredom, fear, patience, quieting, appreciation for slowing down, and loving fascination with common objects are equally important. On the Diamond in the Rough retreats, we value awe and peak experiences, but we are careful not to idealize them or privilege them over other kinds of experiences. Our aim is to live whatever is happening as fully as possible rather than rejecting the here-and-now in favor of the proverbial (or literal) mountain top, or as Beyer (in Chap. 8 of this volume) describes it, "a self-accepting, relaxed, comfortable, consonant sense of embracing presence to whatever emerges into [our] awareness" (p. 135).

Primitive Ecopsychology

My abiding passion for wild nature began long ago when “wild” was, for me, a tangle of bushes at the far end of the backyard about 30 ft from the house and I was five or six. It developed in the woods near my next house—actually a few vacant lots in an expanding subdivision—when I was twelve, later on Boy Scout camping trips as a teenager, and eventually on alpine climbing expeditions and solo backpacking trips as a young adult. In ecopsychology, this passion found a conceptual home and a bridge to my academic work as a way to explore the confluence of nature, psyche, and spirit (Davis 2011). It deepened when I participated in a wilderness rite of passage, or vision fast, based on the work of Steven Foster and Meredith Little (Foster and Little 1989a, b; Davis 2005). I began an apprenticeship with one of their first students, and a few years later, I met and trained with Steven and Meredith at their School of Lost Borders based in Big Pine, California. In addition to the personal impact of the vision fast ceremony, I was drawn to the combination of their straightforward, generous teaching style and their thoughtful articulation of the conceptual underpinnings of their work. I have now led vision fasts and similar wilderness trips for more than 25 years, I train wilderness guides, and I am on the staff of the School of Lost Borders. (The “other sides” of ecopsychology, its critical examination of reductionist, mechanistic, disenchanted culture and its promotion of psychologically sophisticated environmental action, also touch a deep chord in me, but that is a story for another time.)

Steven Foster, at one time a professor of literature and poetry, often experimented with the best language to describe his and Meredith’s work. He was one of the first to use the term ecopsychology and, at some point, began using the term *primitive ecopsychology* for the work of the School of Lost Borders. Here, the word *primitive* suggests two things.

First, it points us to the wild world—undeveloped, untamed, and (relatively) unaltered by humans—as a means of healing, development, and self-realization. Engaging the wild, whether in an extended wilderness excursion, a nearby park, or even in our own bodies in this moment, wakes us up, makes us more whole, and transforms us. (At the same time, Foster was not one to overly romanticize nature. Along with loving and revering the wild world, he knew and respected its raw power and saw the importance of preparation, skill, support, and context setting along with the need to integrate one's wilderness experiences upon returning.) In a second sense, *primitive* suggests that which is primary, original, or first. It points us to direct and immediate contact with the natural world before emotional reactions or intellectual analysis. Thus, primitive ecopsychology may be seen as a branch of the larger field of ecopsychology, one firmly oriented to encountering the wild Earth directly and deeply.

I see three key elements in primitive ecopsychology. The first is the value of direct, immediate contact with the natural world. This element points to two of Hasbach's core orientations of ecopsychology: *phenomenology* and *wildness*, and it is echoed by Hebert (Chap. 3) and others in this volume. Primitive ecopsychology centers on wilderness experiences, but it is by no means limited to wilderness. Looking closely at wilderness experience, we find it to be more of an attitude than an absolute. Most of the places we use for the Diamond in the Rough trip are wilder but not, strictly speaking, wilderness. Signs of human intervention are never far away. How wild does the wilderness need to be for the purposes of primitive ecopsychology? Not very. The key is encountering the natural world directly and openly with less of the insulation of modern life. As evidence, all of our trips have had participants representing a wide range of wilderness experience, from first-time campers to professional wilderness therapists and guides.

The second element of primitive ecopsychology is the model of the vision fast, Foster and Little's core work. With a deep structure reflecting the three stages of a rite of passage (van Gennep 1961), the vision fast is essentially a threshold-crossing ceremony. Following preparation and severance from the familiar, the participant crosses a threshold into a liminal space, and then returns. While the specific purpose of a rite of passage is generally the confirmation of a change in status or a life transition, Steven and Meredith and the School of Lost Borders' staff have designed a wide range of practices with a similar structure (Foster and Little 1989b). It is not uncommon for participants to associate the vision fast model and its practices with Native American Indian spirituality. Indeed, it draws from the same collective human archetypal roots. The orientation of the School of Lost Borders' work has always been to respect those who have developed and kept alive such practices and, at the same time, not to appropriate them. Drawing from the deep, pan-cultural roots of all rites of passage, Steven and Meredith worked to re-create forms relevant to our time, place, and culture.

The third element of primitive ecopsychology is the use of a particular fourfold model of nature, including human nature (Foster and Little 1998). This Four Shields or four directions model is a foundational teaching of the School of Lost Border included in virtually all of its courses. This model of human nature stems equally from natural cycles, human life cycles, and a wide variety of dimensions of human action and experience. It describes four cardinal directions, times of day, seasons, ways of being, ways of knowing, ways of loving, and so on. The specific origins of this version appear to be

Mayan, but its basic outlines are found in many cultures around the world. While our particulars fit the northern temperate zone, remarkably similar four-fold models can be found in teachings of Native American Indians, Africans, Jungian psychology, and many others (Foster and Little 1998). Inasmuch as the Four Shields model derives from our understanding of natural processes and expresses a seamless mirroring of humans and the rest of nature, I feel it could provide a useful foundation for ecopsychology. Indeed, I think of this model as suggesting four complementary means for inter-relating and “intimate participation,” which Adams in Chap. 5 of this volume calls “our essence, our calling, and our path, both in relation with other people and with the rest of the natural world” (p. 67-68) and four means of cultivating intimacy with nature, ourselves, other people (see Puhakka, Chap. 2 in this volume).

Each of these three elements of primitive ecopsychology are important in the Diamond in the Rough retreats. First and foremost, these retreats encourage direct encounter with the natural world and support participants in opening, listening, engaging, and learning from it and as part of it. Drawing from the vision fast model, this encounter takes the form of daily solo experiences along with a longer 24-hour solo, each a ceremony with threshold crossings. Finally, the Four Shields model gives these retreats their basic shape and one of the sources of its core teaching.

The Diamond Approach

The other source for the Diamond in the Rough’s teaching is the Diamond Approach, a contemporary understanding and path for exploring the nature of reality as it is experienced through human consciousness. It aims for full, free, personal, and embodied realization of our potential. Providing a systematic and psychologically sophisticated method for exploring the nature of consciousness and reality, the Diamond Approach enables students to investigate their inner experience, discover and integrate the inner truth of their being, work through the obstacles to knowing and expressing that truth, and develop as authentic, creative, and fulfilled human beings (Davis et al. 2013). It is a mystical path in the sense that its ultimate source is the pure ground of being. At the same time, it values living in the world, relating to others, and functioning effectively.

The Diamond Approach has been developed and described extensively by A. H. Almaas (e.g., Almaas 2004, 2008; Davis 1999). I met Almaas is 1975, and I have been studying with him since as a student and one of the first teachers he trained in the Diamond Approach. Its methods incorporate individual practices (such as meditation and inquiry), small process groups, and large group retreats blending conceptual and experiential teaching. While the Diamond Approach incorporates insights and findings from depth psychology, neuroscience, and a variety of spiritual disciplines and traditions, it is an original system with its own unique logos. I have found it to be a rich, coherent, and well-articulated foundation for ecopsychology's orientation to the transpersonal and the spiritual (Davis 2011).

Among its many elements, two are especially relevant for the Diamond in the Rough retreats: its main method, the practice of inquiry, and one of its central concepts, the soul. The Diamond Approach is based on the practice of inquiry, an engaged, open, and open-ended exploration of one's immediate experience (Almaas 2002). Practicing inquiry, we follow the thread of our present experience attending to body sensations, emotions, associations and insights, and intuitions. Inquiry reveals the inner nature of an experience and supports the eventual transformation of consciousness. Along the way, it exposes resistances, distortions, fixations, and other barriers to the freedom of experience. Inquiry has no particular end-state. Rather, its goals are broad: greater awareness, rediscovery of our inherent essence or true nature, and development of our capacity to realize this essence in our everyday lives. This exploration of immediate experience leads to understanding, which in the Diamond Approach is taken to mean fully lived experience and embodied precise knowing of the experience. Experiencing and knowing are not separate in this system.

The Diamond Approach understands the soul to be the living organ of consciousness; a fluid field of presence, awareness, perception, knowing, and functioning. This use of the term soul is more closely related to its ancient Western roots as the “self” rather than to its uses in many contemporary psychological systems. Roughly equivalent to individual consciousness, the soul is the medium through which all individual experience takes place and the vital energy of sentient beings. Thus, the soul is an organ (or organism) of consciousness and the means by which being knows itself and functions. Simply put, the soul is that which is truly alive in a person. In the context of ecopsychology, I would add that all sentient organisms have a soul and that these souls have different capacities. This understanding of soul also connects with conceptions of the soul of a place (*genius loci*) and the soul of the world (*anima mundi*). A human soul has the greatest capacity (as far as we know) to know herself, suffer from estrangement from her essential nature, and grow through conscious intention.

The soul has the potential to develop and realize its inherent essential nature. It is the soul which takes the journey of development and self-realization. On the other hand, in spite of its inherent aliveness, our souls are generally deadened, dulled, or contracted by patterns of avoidance and defense based on the past. The residue of undigested experiences, conditioning, and defenses results in fixated ego structures such as self-images and identifications which shape the soul and bind, distort, and restrict its capacities. Some of these structures may be temporarily useful to the developing soul (much as a child needs external rules and limits in order to mature), and we see them as approximations of the soul's true nature, not mistakes of development. However, unless they are metabolized into the soul, these structures become barriers to inner freedom and full expression. Consequently, the Diamond Approach distinguishes a soul which is restricted from a soul which is free and realized. The more free the soul, the more apparent and available are its inherent qualities and the more transparent it is to its essential nature as aliveness, presence, emptiness, and depth.

The Diamond in the Rough retreats focus on certain inherent qualities of the soul: its vibrant dynamism, exquisitely tender sensitivity, impressionability (which gives it the capacity to be influenced by experience and to mature), and intrinsic freedom and potentiality. The integration of these qualities of the individual consciousness reveals its essential presence. The wilderness-based Diamond in the Rough retreats provide opportunities for participants' focused inquiries in nature to reveal and deepen this presence.

Common Ground for a Wilderness-based Retreat

Because these two paths, primitive ecopsychology and the Diamond Approach, have had such profound and positive influences on my own life, it was natural that I would seek ways to integrate them. However, I had been involved with both for many years before I found practical ways to link them. I admit to some degree of hesitation, also, not wanting to water down either of them; sometimes it's simply best for different paths to respect each other's independence and unique contributions without merging. However, I have found common ground in both, and my various experiments with bringing them together have given me confidence in the values of drawing on both in creating the Diamond in the Rough retreats. Specifically, both the Diamond Approach and primitive ecopsychology aim to expand and deepen experience and bring us more fully into the present moment. Both draw us into direct and immediate contact with the totality of the body, heart, mind, and spirit. They express a genuinely optimistic view of human nature, along with a respectful, compassionate, and unflinching recognition of suffering and the obstacles to the full realization of our potential. Both appreciate the maturation of the human being as an ongoing and open-ended process. Finally, both the Diamond Approach and primitive ecopsychology are deeply committed to living in the world, *this* world, not simply transcending it.

Here, I will use the general structure of this retreat to outline its teachings. We set up a basecamp in a natural wild area and practice safe, Leave-No-Trace camping techniques. Most days follow a similar format. We gather early in the morning for mindfulness meditation and a brief teaching. The teaching leads to a focus for the day and a task or intention for a daily solo. Participants are on their own for the rest of the morning and afternoon, free to wander from base camp as they wish with the day's intention. We hold these solos in a ceremonial way. We suggest they create a threshold to cross into sacred space and time, and then re-cross it on their return. In such ceremony, simple actions and perceptions gain deeper significance. We especially invite openness, not knowing, and willingness to be surprised on the solo. The areas we use for these retreats offer a variety of directions and terrains to explore in solitude. Sometimes participants choose a particular landscape—into an open meadow, up a steep hill—which matches their inner state; other times, spontaneity and synchronicity guides them. At the end of the day, we gather for a brief check-in and communal dinner, followed by a more thorough debriefing and exploration of the experiences of the day.

The South Shield and the Soul's Dynamism

The Four Shields (or seasons, directions, developmental stages, aspects of the soul, and so on) give us a coherent outline to teach from. We begin with the south shield, the place of summer, high noon, the child, and the body. Entering the new environment of the wilderness invokes a sense of childhood with both excitement and fear. The child is raw, playful, driven by instincts, and innocent to long-term impacts. The south shield invokes the body, physicality, and raw sensations. Its love is erotic and impassioned. These are times of instinctual fight and flight, and summer is a time of high energy, vitality, vigor, and expansion.

One aspect of the Diamond Approach's teachings on the soul mirrors the south shield well. When we first turn our attention to our consciousness, we find it is continually in change. The soul is a constantly morphing medium, revealing itself in dynamism and flow. In a soul which is more free, such dynamism is unfettered. This flow may be more coherent or more fragmented, its pacing languid or frantic, its tone loud or quiet. So, it is with the body, the child, and the energy of summer. From boisterous play and splashing in the water, we summer-children lay down in the shade and drift into reverie chewing on a piece of grass, only to be stung by a bee, awakened to our physicality, and shocked into terror and rage.

The impacts of the ego-self, on the other hand, contract and rigidify the soul, restricting its flow and dampening its dynamism. We may idealize, reject, control, or suppress a child's freedom (only to have it erupt later), all with great costs to our aliveness. The approach we take is not so much working with the psychodynamic defenses against this aliveness, though these may present themselves and we acknowledge them. Rather, we simply aim to bring this dynamic aliveness into consciousness through contact with nature. So, on the Diamond in the Rough retreat, we assign a ceremonial task for this phase which focuses participants on the soul's dynamic flow: "Go into nature and find something which is really alive. How does your body move across the land? Where do you see nature's dynamism? How do you experience your aliveness?"

The West Shield and the Soul's Sensitivity

The sun settles into the west, and summer eventually gives way to fall; shadows lengthen, and the child cannot stay forever a child. Rambunctious children mature into adolescents. Playfulness gains the capacity for self-reflection; anger grows into recognition of its impacts; fear reveals our vulnerability. In the west shield, the child is not gone, but the adolescent takes center stage, along with autumn, dusk, and the heart. Here, the adolescent begins to notice herself or himself as a distinct individual, and the inner life becomes more dramatic. Feelings unimagined to the child appear: doubt, worry, grief, shame. Indeed, the adolescent is, as much as anything, a creature of introspection and self-reflection. The west shield is such a place of doubt, ambivalence, suffering, and heartfelt tenderness. This is the place of wounds and the shadow. While the archetypal child is blissfully unaware of ambiguity, guilt, shame, and other elements of the psychic shadow world, the archetypal adolescent seems to live in the shadows as much as the light. It is a bittersweet and sensitive time, a time to learn to love oneself.

Drawing on the Diamond Approach, we recognize here the soul’s sensitivity to all that touches it, from both internal and external sources. Joy and pain touch the soul, as do cruelty and kindness. The more free the soul, the more sensitive it is; the less free the soul, the more dulled it is. Whereas the obstacles of the south shield dampen the soul’s vitality and dynamism, those of the west shield entangle the soul in self-consciousness and suffering. The soul becomes thick and obscured in its defenses, and the inner light infusing the soul dims a bit. The soul’s sensitivity means it has the potential to be wounded. Yet, a depth of personal presence and authenticity develops through such sensitivity and vulnerability. The focus of the solo in this phase of the retreat draws on this wisdom. To encourage participants to open themselves to all of their experience, we invite them to relate directly to their wounds by encountering wounds in nature. “Find a wounded place in nature and be with it. Let nature be a therapist to you. Choose a natural object and tell it your wounds.” (A tree or rock may be the ultimate non-directive therapist.) By going into our wounds, rather than avoiding them, we reengage the soul’s sensitivity and develop its presence.

The North Shield and the Soul’s Maturation

The shadows of fall deepen into long nights, bringing new challenges and calling for new capacities. Cold winds blow in from the north, and winter is upon us. If we are to survive–if our people are to survive–we need to be thoughtful, analytic, planful, organized, and willing to delay our own gratification for the good of others. The adolescent matures into adulthood and exercises newly developed capacities for such willpower, responsibility, intention, self-control, directed action, structure, and loving consideration for others. Where the south shield was primarily about the body and the west shield about the heart, the north shield is about the mind. Again, the child and the adolescent are not rejected or left behind. Rather, their views of the world are complemented by the adult who can play and feel without being deterred from the work that needs to be done. The gifts of this shield include rationality, will, and the creation of enduring structures for the benefit of the community.

In the Diamond Approach, we find that the soul not only registers the impacts of its experiences; it records them. Imprints and impressions of experience allow the soul to mature, individuating and developing greater capacities for knowing, understanding, and expression (or they contribute to shutting down our true maturity through restrictive, coercive structures). Maturity means a deeper sense of purpose and greater capacities for relating to and loving others, self-expression, delay of gratification, self-assertion, self-soothing, and more. With this maturity comes the capacity for effective action and thoughtful generosity. The wisdom of the north shield and the soul's maturity are expressed in intelligent, sensitive, attuned service.

The focus for this phase of the Diamond in the Rough retreat could go several directions, including the laws of nature, both within and outside us, service to others and to the world, or one's personal sense of purpose. Indeed, a sense of purpose integrates many of these north-shield qualities: maturity, responsibility, care for others, steadfastness, service, and intelligent action. First, we invite participants into a nature-based reflection on their maturation. "What does wild nature show you about where you have been and where are you now? What are your capacities, gifts, and limitations?" Mature self-reflection includes all of these. Then we offer a second question: "And what does wild nature tell you about your purpose and what you have to offer to your people and your place? How do you serve, and what is your calling?" This is an exercise in sincere and mature self-understanding, not self-criticism, self-inflation, or intellectualization.

The East Shield and the Soul's Potentiality

At this point in the retreat, we shift our pattern of morning and evening gatherings and mid-day solos, and we invite participants to a 24-hour solo focused on the east shield. We do very little discussion of the east shield prior to this solo. Since the nature of the east shield transcends ordinary discourse, we keep explanations to a minimum at this point, and instead, we present the 24-hour solo as a chance to go beyond expectations. It is an extended inquiry into one's immediate experience beyond conceptual frameworks and an opportunity for direct encounter with the soul and its potential. The evening before the solo includes a simple ceremony. A fire (if conditions allow it), some singing and poetry, and a ceremonial sacrifice anchor this ceremony. The sacrifice symbolizes and enacts the intention to both honor and let go of preconceptions and to be as open as possible to new experience. The next morning, participants cross a threshold at dawn, symbolically leaving the familiar world and entering a world of unknown potential. They return shortly after dawn on the following day.

In the 24-hour cycle, the east shield corresponds to dawn. As the Earth turns, what becomes of the night? The sky lightens slowly in the east. First, we are fooled a bit by false dawn, and then, the sun! Illumination, revelation, vision, joy, delight! Realization and release. Unearned grace. Divine love. The sun illuminates our world; a brighter light illumines our souls. As spring arrives, what becomes of winter? One day, we discover that the buds on the trees have begun to swell, and a blossom appears on an apparently dead branch. The world is alive with potential once more, and naturally, we feel the urge to celebrate this rebirth. What becomes of the winter shield's adult? As the adult steps through the veils between life and death, a life is completed and a soul returns to formlessness. At the same time, new life crosses the veils between death and life. The spring shield is a place where death and birth co-emerge. This is the place of the elder who has one foot in both worlds, seasoned and wise, and of the newborn, innocent and free. Similarly, this is the place of paradox, mystery, and cosmic play, the place of the joker, jester, and trickster, the one who overturns our structures (built in the north) so they can come alive again, infused with space and light and ready for the vigor of the south shield.

Through the lens of the Diamond Approach, these qualities of the east shield are reflected in the soul’s inherent freedom and potentiality. The potential for the soul’s realization is free and never-ending. The free soul is transparent to its divine nature and open to ongoing transformation; not just expansion in a horizontal dimension to a broader range of experience, but a vertical shift in its identity and its relationship to it’s the ground of being. Forms and boundaries are transcended, and each particular is revealed as a kind of hologram holding and expressing the entire universe; we are in all, and all is in us. The Diamond in the Rough retreats emphasize the soul’s potential, the possibility of its transformation, and its ultimate transparency to being. While most participants do not articulate their east shield experiences this way, we see it in the joyful faces returning from the solo, their peace and contentment, a more open presence, a lighter step, and a taste of the mystery.

The four directions are circular, and spring is followed soon enough by summer. So, the transcendence and illumination of the east shield is followed by a turn to the south shield once more. Our visions must become physical, embodied, and dynamic, or else, carried off by visionary bliss, we stub our toes or sit on a cactus, reminding us in no uncertain terms that we live in this world. In the Diamond Approach, the soul’s potential for transcendence is not separate from its embodiment, both co-emergent properties of being. Therefore, we focus part of the last day on the return from our wilderness basecamp to our homes.

Transpersonal Ecopsychology

What can this work contribute to ecopsychology? While the aspirations of ecopsychology for personal healing and environmental sustainability are vital to the future of human beings and the Earth, I have also been deeply interested in the possibilities of ecopsychology as a basis for optimal mental health, spirituality, and full human development. Ecopsychology often has a spiritual sensibility. One of ecopsychology's challenges is articulating and expressing clearly and confidently the connections between psyche, nature, and spirit. In this view, maturation continues beyond identification with the individual self as a separate entity interacting with nature, beyond views of nature as a family to which we belong, and even beyond views of nature as a broader self of which we are a part (all important views in their own ways) to an identification with spirit, the divine, or the ground of being which gives rise to all manifestations, human and nature. This view also reveals environmental action as a kind of caring reflex of the whole, being caring for itself through each of its particular manifestations. I have found both primitive ecopsychology and the Diamond Approach helpful to me in meeting this challenge.

This challenge also requires developing practices to embody and advance transpersonal approaches in ecopsychology. Of course, for expressing and developing these dimensions of ecopsychology, there are many spiritual practices which can be brought outdoors. Among the many rich examples are links between Buddhism and ecopsychology (e.g., Adams, Chap. 5 in this volume), the cultivation of transcendence through the naturalist's fascination with the world (see Tucker, Chap. 6 in this volume), deep ecology work of Joanna Macy (Macy and Brown 1998), Bill Plotkin's (2003) *Soulcraft*, meditation and awareness practices (e.g., Swanson 2001; Coleman 2006), and the ceremonial ecotherapy and wilderness rites of passage work at the School of Lost Borders and similar groups worldwide. The Diamond in the Rough retreats are also examples of this work, calling in the full circle of nature (summer, fall, winter, spring), human nature (body, heart, mind, and spirit), human development (child, adolescent, adult, and death/birth), and the totality of the human soul's aliveness (including its dynamism, sensitivity, maturation, and unlimited potential). Ecopsychology is developing its south, west, and north shields; transpersonal ecopsychology and the example of the Diamond in the Rough retreats help complete it, revealing its east shield and enriching ecopsychology as a path for self-realization and the ongoing fulfillment of the human-nature relationship.

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