Diamond in the Rough

Primitive Ecopsychology, the Diamond Approach, and Transpersonal Ecopsychology

John Davis

This article describes a confluence of two paths, the Diamond Approach and primitive ecopsychology, using the example of wilderness retreats I call “Diamond in the Rough.” This integration can expand the field of ecopsychology into a more precise and useful understanding of its overlap with spirituality or transpersonal ecopsychology.1

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, the over-riding environmental questions of our time are the sources of, consequences of, and solutions to environmental disaster. We are rooted in our images of self and nature and the behaviors which stem from them. Ecopsychology integrates ecology and psychology in responding to both sets of questions. Among its contributions are shifting the basis for environmental action from anxiety, blame, and coercion to devotion, joy, and invitation (Roszak 2001); bringing the natural world and ecological thinking to psychotherapy and personal growth (Conn 1998; Swanson 2001); and fostering ways of living which are both ecologically and psychologically healthy and sustainable (Fisher 2002).

One of a number of areas studying human-nature relationships (such as environmental psychology, ecospirituality, and environmental education), ecopsychology is founded on three insights. (1) There is a deeply bonded relationship between humans and nature. (2) The dissociation of humans and nature leads to suffering both for the environment (ecological devastation) and for humans (arrested human development, grief, despair, anxiety, or alienation). (3) Realizing and deepening the connection between humans and nature is healing for both. This reconnection expresses itself in ecotherapy, work on grief and despair about environmental destruction, integration of the interlocking projects of environmental action and social justice, and support for more effective and sustainable environmental action and lifestyles based on positive motivations such as joy, compassion, and love.

Primitive Ecopsychology

For many years, I have had a deep and abiding passion for wild nature, finding support, challenge, insight, and growth in the natural world and especially its wilder places. This passion found a home in ecopsychology as a vehicle for exploring the confluence of nature, psyche, and spirit (Davis 1998), and 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 1988; 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. 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 for 20 years, and I am on the staff of the School of Lost Borders. 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 for 20 years, and I am on the staff of the School of Lost Borders. 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 for 20 years, and I am on the staff of the School of Lost Borders. 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 for 20 years, and I am on the staff of the School of Lost Borders. 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 for 20 years, and I am on the staff of the School of Lost Borders.

Foster, at one-time a professor of literature and poetry, often experimented with the best language to describe his

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1 Thanks to Ann DeBaldo, who made suggestions on an earlier draft of this chapter, to my partners in this work, and to my teachers.
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

copsychology? Not very. The key is to encounter the natural world directly and openly with less of the insulation of modern life.

The second element of primitive ecopsychology is the model of the vision fast, Foster and Little’s first 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 is status or a life transition, Foster and Little designed a wide range of practices with a similar struc-

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Lost Borders. Here, the word “primitive” suggests two things. First, it points us to the wild world undeveloped, untamed, and unaltered by humans as a means of healing, maturation, and self-realization. Touching 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 romanticize nature. He respected its raw power and saw the importance of preparation, support, context-setting, and integration of nature experiences.) 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.

I see three key elements in primitive ecopsychology. The first is the value of direct, immediate contact with the natural world. The paradigm of primitive ecopsychology centers on wilderness experiences, but it is by no means limited to wilderness. Looking closely at wilderness experience, we will find it to be more of an attitude than an absolute. Most of the places we use for the Diamond in the Rough retreats their basic shape and a part of the natural world, and learning from it. Drawing from the vision fast model, this encounter takes the form of daily solo experiences, each a threshold crossing, along with a longer 24-hour solo. Finally, the Four Shields model gives these retreats their basic shape and a part of its core teaching.

The Diamond Approach

The Diamond Approach is a thorough, coherent, and precise articulation of human nature and a path for living an authentic, realized life in the world. It is a mystical path in the sense that its ultimate foundation is the pure nonconceptual ground of being. At the same time, it values living in the world, relat-
The soul is the organ of consciousness or being itself, the means by which being knows itself and the means through which being functions.
ity, and raw sensations. 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 constantly morphing, revealing its fundamental dynamism and flow. In a soul which is more free, such dynamism is unfettered. The impacts of the ego-self, on the other hand, contract and rigidify the soul, restricting its flow and dampening its dynamism. 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.

On the Diamond in the Rough, the task for this phase focuses participants on the soul’s dynamic flow. We invite participants to go into nature and focus on movement and flow. 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

Summer eventually gives way to fall; shadows lengthen, and the child cannot stay forever a child. The rambunctious child matures into an adolescent. Playfulness slows and reflects; anger grows in recognition of its impacts; fear quiets into awareness of our vulnerability. The child is not gone, but the adolescent takes center stage. This is the territory of the west shield: autumn, dusk, adolescence, and the heart. Here, the adolescent begins to notice herself or himself as a distinct individual, and the inner life becomes more dramatic. Feelings unknown 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 heart-felt tenderness. This is also the place of 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.

Drawing on the Diamond Approach, we recognize the soul’s sensitivity to all that touches it, whether from internal or external sources. Joy and pain impact 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 damper 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, and the inner light infusing the soul dims a bit.

This sensitivity in the soul means it has the potential to be wounded. Yet, there is a depth of personal presence and authenticity which 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 the soul to all its experience, we encourage them to relate directly to their wounds and to the wounds they encounter in nature. “Find a wounded place in nature, and be with it,” we suggest, or they may engage nature as a therapist, choosing a tree or rock (the ultimate “non-directive therapist”) and telling their wounds to that natural object. By going into our wounds, rather than avoiding them, we re-engage 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. Now, we need. If we are to survive if our people are to survive we need to be more thoughtful and analytic, planning, organizing, and delaying our own gratification for the good of the community. The adolescent matures into adulthood and exercises newly developed capacities for willpower, responsibility, intention, self-control, directed action, structure, and 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 incorporated into the adult who can play and feel without being deterred from the work that needs to be done. Thus, this shield is the place of winter, night, adulthood, and the mind. Its gifts include rationality, will, and the creation of enduring structures.

Through the Diamond Approach, we find something else to be true about the soul. The soul not only registers the impacts of its experiences; it records them. These imprints and impressions allow the soul to mature, individuating and developing greater capacities for knowing, understanding, and expression. With these come the capacity for effective action and thoughtful generosity.

While the focus for this phase of the retreat could go several directions, including exploration of the laws of nature, both within and outside us, we often focus on a personal exploration of our human-nature relationships. Participants are encouraged to look at the patterns in their views of their relationship with the natural world and the impacts these patterns have on their souls. How mature, realistic, and confident are these views of nature? Are they based on fear of nature, objectification and use of nature, or a kinship with the natural world? This is an exercise in sincere and mature self-understanding, not self-criticism, self-inflation, or intellectualization. Suspending both judgment and
transient to its divine nature and open to 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 its source or ground.

The Diamond in the Rough retreats typically emphasize the soul’s potential, the possibility of its transformation, and its ultimate transparency to being. Unobstructed by structures based on defenses and the past, the soul perceives and expresses its depth. While most participants do not articulate their east shield experiences this way, we see it in the joyful faces returning from the solo, a deeper sense of peace and contentment, a more open presence, a lightness in their steps and voices, and a taste of the mystery.

With regard to the Four Shields, the cycle does not stop in the spring. Spring is followed 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 are embodied. Therefore, we focus part of the last day on the return from our wilderness basecamp to our homes.

Toward a Transpersonal Ecopsychology

What can this work contribute to the discourse on human-nature relationships and 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 interested in the possibilities of ecopsychology as a basis for self-realization and full human development. Ecopsychology often has qualities or sensitivities associated with spiritual wisdom traditions. Yet, these qualities are more often alluded to than examined or practiced. Ecopsychology has not articulated clearly and robustly the connections between psyche, nature, and spirit, in large part, I believe, because it has not had the language to do so. This inquiry has led me to the interface of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology. Along with the Diamond Approach, transpersonal psychology can provide such a language (Davis 2003).

I propose that ecopsychology be extended to a view that both includes and transcends its nature-as-family and nature-as-self metaphors to a narrative in which both nature and psyche flow as expressions of the same ground. This is not simply a reciprocity between humans and nature nor merely a broadening of the self to include the natural world, though it includes both. In this view, maturation continues beyond identification with the individual self as a separate entity interacting with nature to an identification with being, spirit, or the ground of being which gives rise to all manifestations, human and nature. Nature and human are relative discriminations, useful in some contexts but not
Environmental action is revealed as a caring reflex, the Earth caring for itself. The Diamond in the Rough retreats are one expression of this work, integrating the full circle of nature (summer, fall, winter, spring; day, dusk, night, dawn), human nature (child, adolescent, adult, death/birth; body, heart, mind, and spirit), and the totality of the human soul’s aliveness (including its dynamism, sensitivity, maturation, and potential). Ecopsychology has developed its south, west, and north shields; transpersonal ecopsychology completes this view, representing its east shield, and enriching ecopsychology as a path for self-realization and on-going maturation of the soul.

References