

Down to Earth Spirituality

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During the awakening time of the 1960s, many of us then coming of age began searching for a unifying perspective on human life, one that would enable us to grow as both psychological and spiritual beings. My personal search led me to discover **psychosynthesis**, and this spiritual psychology became the center of my both my personal and professional life. During the 1990s, another period of searching brought me to the twin disciplines of **deep ecology** and **ecopsychology**, both of which expanded and enhanced the understandings and skills I had developed in my psychosynthesis work. Altogether psychosynthesis, deep ecology and ecopsychology form a unifying and dynamic basis for a down-to-earth spirituality in the 21st century.

Psychosynthesis

Roberto Assagioli, an Italian psychiatrist and mystic, began to articulate psychosynthesis early in the 20th century, believing that a complete psychology needed to include all dimensions of human beings, including the spiritual dimension. He focused on how human beings move toward increasing wholeness, integrating or *synthesizing* all the parts of the personality to work harmoniously together, so each person can respond creatively, even joyfully, to the psychological and spiritual demands of life. Psychosynthesis incorporates principles and practices from Buddhism, Yoga and other Eastern philosophies, as well as from Western spiritual traditions, philosophy, and psychology.

Psychosynthesis models are oriented toward health and potential rather than pathology. They point to the nature of “I” (or personal self), the will, the multi-dimensional unconscious, the personality structure and our spiritual source: Self. They explicate the relationship of the various personality functions to one another and to “I”, and the relationship of “I” to Self-of individual to Universal.

Assagioli conceived of “I” or *personal self* as awareness and intentionality, or *will*. “I” makes the choices that determine life direction, style and form. He saw “I” to be without qualities —pure awareness and will — and the manifestation of a Transpersonal Self, an energetic transcendent/immanent Source of all life. ”Self-realization” refers to the expression of Self through the personality (with “I” acting as administrative agent).

Much of the time we are caught up in a survival trance, identified with our passing emotions, our beliefs and assumptions, our concepts and ideas about the way things are, and our bodily sensations and appearance. When we identify with one or another part of the personality, we cannot be clearly aware of the rest of our reality, nor of the guidance of Self. Psychosynthesis guiding seeks to help us *disidentify* from limited patterns of feeling, thought, and behavior so we can move our awareness freely among them and act from conscious choice, in alignment with Self.

Self is always present, whether or not we are feeling particularly “centered” or “whole,” even when we are caught up with a passing feeling or belief. We often associate the feeling of “being centered” with Self, but sometimes we awaken to Self in the midst of despair and disintegration. Spiritual psychosynthesis is the process of awakening to the presence and movement of Self in the whole of our lives, so that we live and act in greater harmony, bringing our gifts into action in the world.

Ecopsychology and Deep Ecology

To describe these closely related movements, I have adapted excerpts from *Coming Back to Life*, which I coauthored with Buddhist scholar and activist Joanna Macy.

Ecopsychology

Western psychology has virtually ignored our relationship to the natural world. In its definition of mental health, our connection to the source of life does not figure, nor is our destruction of our life support system included in its list of pathologies. Now the new discipline of *ecopsychology* addresses this failure and studies the human psyche within the larger systems of which it is a part. It explores how our cultural alienation from nature engenders not only careless and destructive behavior toward our environment, but also many common disorders such as depression and addiction.

Psychotherapists within the movement help their clients find strength and meaning through experiencing their interconnectedness with all life and acting on its behalf.

Deep Ecology

Our interdependence with all life of Earth has profound implications for our attitudes and actions.

To clarify these implications, and free us from outmoded notions of our separateness from nature, deep ecology arose, both as a philosophy and a movement. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, a mountain climber and scholar of Gandhi, coined the term in the 1970s.

Deep ecology questions fundamental premises of the Industrial Growth Society, among them the assumption that humans are the crown of creation and the ultimate measure of value. Deep ecology offers us a broader and more sustainable sense of our own worth, as viable members of the great, evolving community of Earth. It holds that we can break free from the species arrogance that threatens not only ourselves but all complex life forms within reach.

We cannot genuinely experience our interrelatedness with all life if we are blind to our own human-centeredness and how deeply embedded it is in our culture and consciousness. Deep ecologist John Seed, an Australian rainforest activist, describes both the ways it constricts us and the rewards we find in moving beyond it.

Anthropocentrism means human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute “human race” for man and “all other species” for woman... When humans investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric self-cherishing, a most profound change in consciousness begins to take place. Alienation subsides. The human is no longer a stranger, apart... There is a transformation in your relationship to other species, and in your commitment to them... What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature. This is, the change is a spiritual one, sometimes referred to as deep ecology. (Seed, Macy, Naess, Fleming. 1988)

Arne Naess has a term for the wider sense of identity that John Seed describes. He calls it the *ecological self* and presents it as the fruit of a natural maturation process. We underestimate ourselves, he says, when we identify self with the narrow, competitive ego. “With sufficient all-sided maturity” we not only move on from ego to a social self and a metaphysical self, but an ecological self as well. Through widening circles of identification, we vastly extend the boundaries of our self-interest and enhance our joy and meaning in life.

A welcome and significant feature of this concept is the way it transcends the need to sermonize about our moral responsibilities to other beings.

The requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves. (Seed, Macy, Naess, Fleming. 1988)

A Dynamic Duo

Put simply, psychosynthesis facilitates our self-awareness, choice, and relationship to Spirit/Self, while ecopsychology/deep ecology facilitates our awareness of our interconnectedness with-and responsibility to-all life around us. Both approaches are based in an understanding of our interrelat-

edness, within our own psyches, with other humans, and with the “more-than-human” natural world that sustains us in every moment of life. Both work to include and integrate the various forces, patterns, and dimensions within and beyond the individual, and can lead to a spiritual awakening to our true nature within the web of life.

References

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