

Therapy in the Face of Climate Change

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Abstract

Climate change represents one of the greatest challenges of our time. To meet this challenge requires a profound reorientation of our relationship with the Earth and with all who share our planetary home. This shift requires a transformation of consciousness from seeing the world as an object to be exploited or a resource to be plundered to knowing and living a profound interconnection with all that is. It requires us to fully experience our “totemic selves”—that part of us that recognizes our kinship with the more-than-human world and our dependence on it. What role can psychology play in this paradigm shift? More specifically, what is the role of the therapist during this challenging time? How do we address these hard issues in the lives of our clients, and how do we utilize our skills as healers in our communities? This essay explores how the practices and methods of ecotherapy and the concepts of rewilding and a Nature Language might be useful in the clinician’s work as we approach this pervasive topic with our clients. Key Words: Ecotherapy—Rewilding—Nature Language—Climate change—Ecopsychology.

Introduction

Climate change represents one of the greatest challenges of our time—threatening a sustainable, healthy environment that can support life on the Earth. To meet this challenge requires a profound reorientation of our relationship with the Earth and with all who share our planetary home. This shift requires a transformation of consciousness from seeing the world as an object to be exploited or a resource to be plundered to knowing and living a profound interconnection with all that is (Berry, 1999; Macy & Brown, 1998; Tarnas, 2007). It requires us to fully experience our totemic selves—that part of us that recognizes our kinship with the more-than-human world and our dependence on it (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012).

What role can psychology play in this paradigm shift? More specifically, what is the role of the therapist during this challenging time? How do we address these hard issues in the lives of our clients, and how do we utilize our skills as healers in our communities?

In this essay, I discuss how some of the practices and methods of ecotherapy (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Hasbach, 2012, 2013) and how the concepts of rewilding (Kahn & Hasbach, 2013) and a Nature Language (Kahn et al., 2012) might be useful in the clinician’s work as we approach this pervasive topic with our clients in a meaningful way. To begin, I’d like to ask: How do *you* respond to climate change? How do you think about it? What do you feel about it? What have you seen in your clients, patients, students, family members, or fellow activists?

The Current Role of Psychology in the Climate Change Conversation

The discipline of psychology was late coming to the conversation about climate change. But in the last few years, much more attention has been paid to this important topic (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change, 2009; Clayton et al., 2014; Swim et al., 2011; Winerman, 2014). Just a few years ago, the majority of articles focused on changing behaviors to mitigate human effects on the environment, most specifically aimed at reducing our carbon footprint through the reduction of fossil fuel use (Brown, 2008; Doppelt, 2008; Gardner & Stern, 2008; Prochaska et al., 1994). More recently, the psychological literature is focused on how to cope with acute trauma related to climate-related disasters such as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and warns of the rise in chronic stress related to climate change leading to a variety of diagnoses (Clayton et al., 2014). The field of psychology has also contributed to the conversation about climate change by addressing issues of environmental justice and by participating in discussions about how climate change is affecting vulnerable populations who live in fragile and often degraded parts of the world. In the Executive Summary of the report titled *Beyond Storms and Droughts: The Psychological Impacts of Climate Change*, the authors wrote:

Research and communications about the impacts of climate change have generally focused on physical impacts, like more extreme storms, rising sea levels, and increasingly severe droughts. Psychological impacts, on the other hand, have received comparatively little attention. The goal of this report is to summarize these and other impacts on human well-being, and provide climate communicators, planners, policymakers, public health officials, and other leaders the tools they need to both respond to these impacts and bolster public engagement around climate change. (Clayton et al., 2014, p. 5)

These are broad issues that call for mindful, collaborative solutions by communities, governments, and global leaders. Ecopsychology has an important role to play in addressing the broad issues of climate change. As paleontologist and science educator Scott Sampson wrote:

If the sustainability crisis is first and foremost a problem of mind, then psychology assumes a critical role in any proposed solution ... More to the point, if the roots of our present crisis lie in a dysfunctional relationship between humanity and nonhuman nature, ecopsychology—the field designated to explore that relationship—suddenly becomes one of the most critical and pressing areas of inquiry. (Sampson, 2012, p. 24)

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This essay focuses on addressing the issue of climate change on a more intimate level. Specifically, how does the individual therapist address the chronic psychological impacts of climate change? Do we recognize the chronic stressors and emotions that are in response to the gradual effects of climate change that are often not articulated by our clients? *Are we asking the right questions?*

The report by Clayton, Manning, and Hodge (2014) lists some of the chronic physical climate change impacts we are experiencing, including

a slow change in mean temperature, humidity, and dew point; sea level rise; spread of disease; changes in agricultural conditions and associated issues of food security; changes in the natural landscape; ... ecosystem disruption; increased air pollution; and decreased availability of fresh water. (p. 15)

As climate change scrawls irrevocable changes on the landscape, large numbers of people are experiencing a type of stress and a set of negative emotions that Glenn Albrecht, an Australian professor of environmental studies, calls *solastalgia*. Albrecht defines solastalgia as “a feeling of desolation or melancholia about the emplaced and

lived experience of the chronic deterioration of a loved home environment” (Albrecht, 2012, p. 255). He began thinking of solastalgia not with regard to climate change but in response to large-scale open-pit mining in New South Wales. He studied the people living in the area and found that they were angry and saddened and felt helpless to change what was happening to their home land. It got him thinking about the role of place, land, and landscape in people’s definition of home and their sense of well-being. *Solastalgia* is a form of homesickness—a longing for home, as what was once familiar becomes unpredictable. As therapists, do we take into account a client’s connection to her or his “home place”?

Albrecht coined another term that is relevant to this topic: eco-anxiety. Though we don’t find this term in the DSM-5, it’s a descriptive one that Albrecht defines as “the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse” (2012, p. 249). Climate change is a *really* threatening issue. Is it any wonder that so many people avoid the topic? Yet even as many of us avoid consciously addressing the concerns related to climate change, at some deeper level—perhaps at the ecological unconscious level—we *know* (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012; Roszak, 1995; Smith, 2010).

And what about those people who make it their life work to know the facts about our changing world—scientists, educators of environmental science and environmental studies, students studying in these areas, environmental activists, and others who face the evidence daily—how do they cope with the sense of overwhelm? We need to look at the emotional experience of knowing the problem. John Fraser, a conservation psychologist and researcher who recently participated in an interview with Janet Swim, the chair of the 2009 APA Task Force on Psychological Perspectives on Climate Change, for an APA podcast, said, “When you can see the evidence, it is distressing. And when you think people around you don’t believe you, you self-edit because the emotional labor that goes into doing that work is difficult” (Fraser & Swim, 2014).

What does it mean to be the storyteller of climate change and the long emergency?

In that same interview, Swim said that one of the emotions she is most interested in relating to this topic is “hope.” She stated,

hope is basically transforming fear into a positive experience in a sense that you have a sense that you know what you can do ... when you can start thinking about your ability to do something, having a plan of action—not necessarily a big plan of action, but have a plan for how you can talk to people, then you cannot feel so threatened. You can feel like you have some agency. (Fraser & Swim, 2014)

Another way to frame this “sense of agency” that Swim refers to is empowerment—a feeling that allows one to step into the challenge.

The Clinician’s Role in This Time of Climate Change

From a pragmatic point of view, how might clinicians address the chronic stressors, profound losses, and powerful emotions associated with the “long emergency”? How might clinicians encourage and support a sense of empowerment in their clients on this topic? Issues of climate change are rarely the “presenting problem” when a client comes to the office. Yet rates of depression are on the rise, along with an increase in anxiety and suicide. Perhaps it’s time to ask if there is a possible connection.

What might clinicians add to their toolbox of therapeutic methods that allow the topic of climate change and the reality of the “long emergency” to be addressed in a meaningful, depthful way? How might therapy be instrumental in providing a forum for people to address the deep and often unacknowledged feelings associated with our environmental crisis, so that energy can be redirected to creative, solution-oriented endeavors?

I would like to propose that clinicians consider incorporating some basic ecotherapeutic methods into their practice in order to fully address the complexity of their clients’ issues, and perhaps support clients’ behavior changes with regard to their relationship with the natural world. Drawing on ecopsychological theory, which assumes that our inner world and the outer world are intimately connected (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Kahn & Hasbach, 2012; Roszak, 1995), ecotherapy is an emerging therapeutic modality that enlarges the scope of treatment to include the human-nature relationship (Hasbach, 2012, 2013).

In the remainder of this essay, I highlight several practices from ecotherapy that help address the long emergency in which we all find ourselves. These methods include broadening our therapeutic focus or context of therapy, expanding the intake session, and incorporating the concepts of rewilding and a Nature Language into the therapeutic process (Hasbach, 2012, 2013). I have written about these methods from a private practitioner’s perspective, so I challenge the reader to think creatively about how these methods might apply to her or his particular practice and therapeutic setting.

Broadening the therapeutic focus

As mentioned earlier, ecotherapy enlarges the traditional scope of treatment to include the human-nature relationship. When we consider the various focal points of therapy, we often consider the intrapsychic processes including unconscious motivations; we consider the

interpersonal relationships that the client is involved in; we ask about the family of origin and the existing family structure the client lives in; and we recognize the social and cultural influences in the client’s life. We can imagine the client nested in all these aspects of life and view these aspects like the lens of a camera, each widening the scope of treatment focus. Ecotherapy expands that treatment focus further to recognize the ecological system the client evolved from and is a part of (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Clinebell, 1996; Hasbach, 2012, 2013). By expanding the scope of treatment to include the human-nature relationship, we invite clients to acknowledge their relationship with the natural world or their feelings of disconnection from it; to express their feelings of despair, fear, apathy, guilt, and helplessness, as well as their feelings of joy, sense of belonging, groundedness, and strength. By expanding the lens with which we view the client and the therapeutic context, clinicians open new possibilities for deepening therapy: We invite clients to tap their own innate wisdom and strength, we include nature as a partner in the therapeutic process, and we make use of nature imagery and nature metaphor to enrich therapeutic dialogue. Broadening the therapeutic context also allows for feelings related to the long emergency to be an appropriate topic for therapy.

Expanding the intake interview

During the typical intake interview, the therapist learns about the issues that have brought clients to therapy and gather information about clients’ physical and mental health, their education and work history, their current living situation, and their family of origin. To understand the broader context of nature in clients’ lives, I include several nature-oriented questions. These questions explore recollections of being outdoors in nature as a child, inquire about how family members viewed the natural world, and ask about what they like to do outdoors at this point in their life, as well as how often they get to do it. Answers to these questions provide initial information about the clients’ historical and current relationships with nature and the ways that they orient to it, value it, and engage it (Hasbach, 2012, 2013). As importantly, these discussions make the clients’ experiences of the natural world and their concerns related to climate change (stories in the news, weather events, concerns about rising sea levels, species extinction, etc.) relevant to therapy and lay the groundwork for future discussions and nature-based assignments.

Rewilding therapy

As a species, we came of age in a world far wilder than today’s. Much of that wildness still exists within the architecture of our bodies and minds and needs to be rediscovered, re-engaged, and fully integrated into our lives for us to flourish (Kahn & Hasbach, 2013). But

most traditional therapy occurs in an indoor office space and focuses on issues that stop at the urban boundary. Many of the nature-based practices and methods of ecotherapy invite a reconnection with wild nature and the wilder Self. Ecotherapy recognizes that a part of our deep knowing can be accessed if we are willing to move out into the natural world and experience it fully and mindfully. Ecotherapists invite clients to take the therapeutic work outdoors through assigning nature-based homework for the client to do between sessions and/or by holding therapy sessions outdoors. Direct experience in nature affords heightened sensorial experiences and perceptions that connect our inner world with the outer landscape. Through an increased consciousness in their ecological community, clients have the opportunity to widen their circle of identification and become more aware of their sense of place and feelings of belonging to something bigger than themselves.

There is a growing body of evidence that supports the assertion that direct interaction with nature enhances people's physical and psychological well-being (Bratman et al., 2012, 2015; Chalquist, 2009; Kahn, 1999; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Nisbet & Zelenski, 2011; Stevens, 2010; Ulrich, 1993). For more than two decades, this proposition has emerged under the rubric of biophilia. Edward O. Wilson (1984) defined biophilia as a genetically based (thus innate) human tendency to affiliate with life. By encouraging clients to spend contemplative, alone time in nature, we foster the experience of reconnecting to the wilder Self and to our evolutionary home. We invite them to slow the pace of life and be open to hearing their own internal voice. We encourage a respite from technology and invite a rebalancing of attention. William James wrote, "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind" (1902/2010). What is shaping the minds of our clients these days?

In my practice, I regularly assign homework to clients that takes them outdoors between our scheduled sessions. For example, one assignment requires the client to select a special place that he or she agrees to visit several times a week for a period of a month. The client is asked to form a relationship with this place and spend time in it during varied weather conditions and at different times of the day. Over the course of a month, this exercise fosters a gradual deepening of connection, a heightened sensory perception, an expanded knowledge of the place, and a sense of belonging. Other examples of nature-based activities I assign to my clients include asking them to take a "contemplative nature walk" that has a specific ritualized beginning, middle, and ending; to spend time alone in a natural setting such as walking in the woods, sitting by a lake or river, or walking the water's edge at the beach; to journal about an issue of concern during a natural transition time such as a sunrise or sunset;

to plant a garden or window box; or to become involved in a community restoration project (Hasbach, 2012). Experiences like these afford an opportunity for thoughts, feelings, and ideas to become more deeply embodied and fuels a concern and affiliation, thus caring, for the natural world. They also provide rich images and metaphors to work with during subsequent therapy sessions.

Bill Plotkin (2014) wrote in a recent article for this journal:

a mature ecotherapy does not attempt to decrease our anxiety, outrage, fear, grief, or despair in response to the ongoing industrial destruction of the biosphere; rather, it helps us more fully experience these feelings so that we can revitalize ourselves emotionally and, in so doing, enable our greatest contributions to a cultural renaissance. (p. 3)

It is a part of what Macy and Brown (1998) refer to as the Work that Reconnects and what the theologian Thomas Berry (1999) referred to as the Great Work. In her recent book, *Reclaiming the Wild Soul*, Mary Reynolds Thompson asked,

what if the process of rewilding the Earth began with rewilding our souls? If we truly grasp the interconnectedness between all living things, doesn't it follow that every change within us will be reflected in the whole? ... What if healing the world really starts from within? (Thompson, 2014, p. xxiii)

As a species, we are being called to grow into a worldview that involves a "re-membering" of ourselves to the natural world. A critical component of growing into this worldview involves re-awakening our wild, primal self that is deeply connected to the more-than-human world—our totemic self—and integrating it with our scientific culture and technological selves (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012).

Incorporating a Nature Language into ecotherapy

Finally, I will introduce the concept of a Nature Language (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012; Kahn et al., 2010, 2012) and discuss how a Nature Language might be utilized in therapeutic work with clients (Hasbach, 2012). A Nature Language can be defined as a systematic way to speak about the rich and diverse ways we experience and interact with the natural world. This concept can be especially useful to therapists and others who are incorporating direct nature experiences into the therapeutic work with clients, students, and so on. It's one way to address the important question Plotkin (2014) raised when he asked,

What happens when we rewild our techniques and practices for facilitating human development not by merely getting them out the door and onto the land or waters but much more significantly

by fashioning approaches in which our encounters with the other-than-human world are the central feature? ... when we allow nature itself to be the primary therapist or guide. (p. 3)

A Nature Language is composed of patterns of interactions between humans and nature; their wide range of manifestations; and the meaningful, deep, and often joyous feelings they engender (Kahn et al., 2012). Many of these patterns developed during our evolutionary history as we coevolved with the natural world. Examples of interaction patterns include *Sitting by fire*, *Walking the edges of nature*, *Recognizing and being recognized by nonhuman Other*, *Moving away from settlement and the return*, *Caring for another Being*, *Sitting under the night sky*, *Interacting with the periodicity of nature*, and *Interacting with the cycles of life and death*. Interaction patterns such as these are often experienced in combination with one another and are often experienced on a continuum of wild manifestations to more domestic ones. For example, a wilder manifestation of the interaction pattern *Cooking over fire* might entail sitting by a fire ring outdoors under a night sky and cooking a piece of wild caught salmon over an open flame. A more domestic version of that same interaction pattern might entail sitting on one's deck while the salmon is cooked on the gas grill. A Nature Language provides a way to think about what elements of nature or what experiences in nature might be most potent for a therapeutic endeavor.

By incorporating a Nature Language into therapy through consciously working with interaction patterns and their varied manifestations, we can begin to speak more systematically about behaviors that we engage in with nature and address the meaning, the emotions, and the psychological experiences that result. In so doing, we create opportunities for clients to reawaken deeper, authentic feelings of connection and belonging in the more-than-human world (Hasbach, 2012).

Conclusion

I write this essay from the perspective of a practicing clinician—one who asks “what can I do to make a difference?” How do I not let the sense of despair or overwhelm paralyze me? Do I love life, the Earth, the land, and the kinship I find with the Other, enough to act? We all have a part to play. The key is to recognize our own sphere of influence and be willing to add our voice, engage our creative energy, and risk speaking our truth.

Every individual matters. Every individual has a role to play. Every individual makes a difference. —Jane Goodall

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