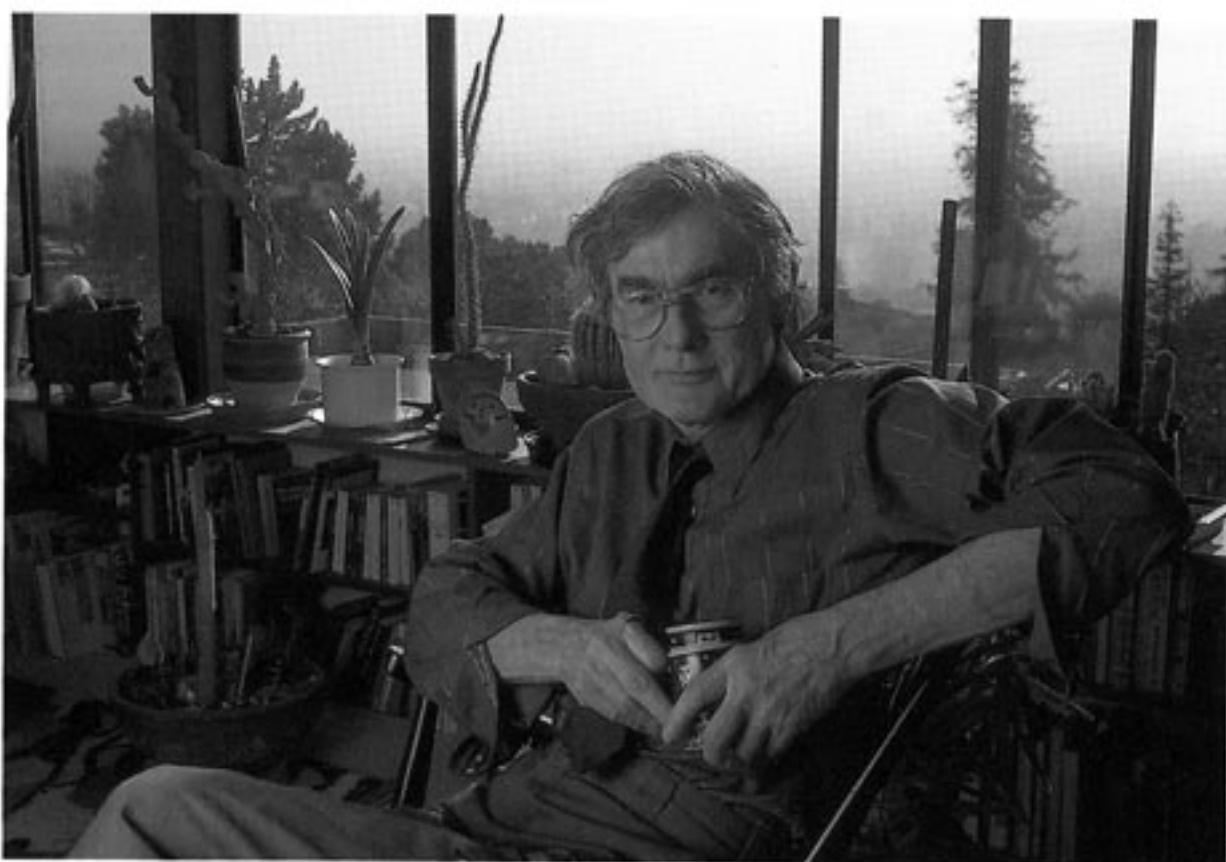


# *The Greening of Psychology*

A CONVERSATION WITH THEODORE ROSZAK



by Susan Ives

In 1969 Theodore Roszak's book *The Making of a Counterculture* offered insight into the youthful rebellion of the 1960s. Although we had never heard it before, the word "counterculture" immediately became part of the language. It was as though the term had always been there, waiting only for a critical sequence of political and cultural events to which it might be applied.

The same is true of "ecopsychology," the subject of Roszak's 1992 book *The Voice of the Earth* and a term now finding its way into our vocabulary. Ecopsychology draws a connection between our

relationship with the earth and our mental health. Roszak suggests that not only our sanity but our survival could depend on helping people reconnect with the natural world.

Roszak, now sixty and a history professor at California State University, believes that the lessons of ecopsychology are pertinent to today's environmental movement. He is currently editing a collection of writings titled *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, to be published in May by Sierra Club Books. Roszak is an endorser of TPL's Green Cities Initiative, a national program to create more parks in urban areas. We spoke at his home in Berkeley, California.

**Q** How would you describe ecopsychology?

**A** Ecopsychology is an attempt to broaden our understanding of mental health to include the natural world. To use a catch phrase, ecopsychology seeks to find our sympathetic bond with the earth. It asks a question that is not common in most therapy: How can we be sane if we are not in a harmonious relationship with the environment?

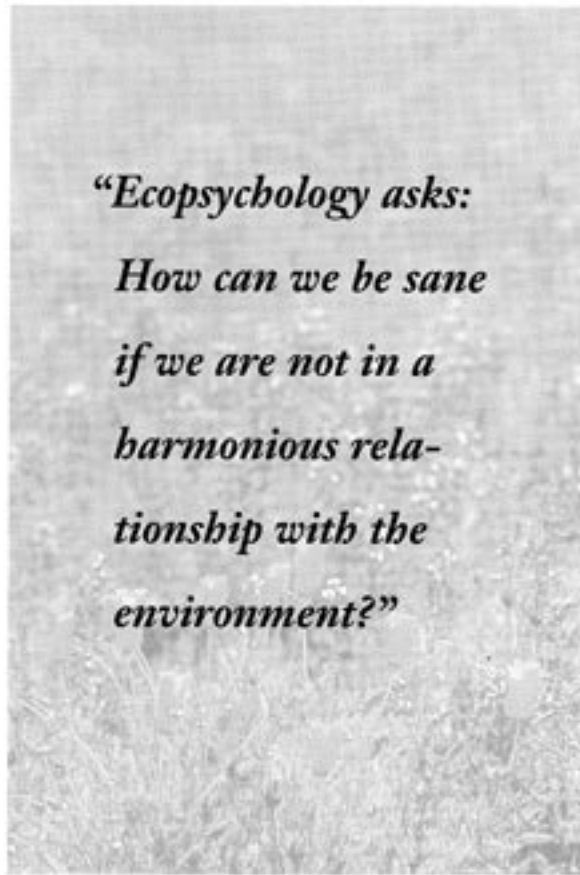
It's quite obviously the case that we are out of balance with the natural world. As a culture we are experiencing what a psychotherapist might call "dysfunctional environmental relations." But right now that's not a category psychologists recognize.

Before Freud came along in the nineteenth century, there were plenty of people giving counseling, mainly clergymen. Because they paid no attention to sexuality, they gave it little importance in people's lives. Freud's great breakthrough was simply to say that we should observe the obvious. I think the same is going to be true of ecopsychology.

My assumption is that once people recognize that our mental health depends on repairing our relationship to the natural world, they will have a deeply emotional, psychological investment in a healthy environment. They would recognize nature not merely as a collection of resources but as something that affects the psychological quality of our lives. One of ecopsychology's goals is to have more and more therapists—and their clients—agree on an environmentally based definition of mental health, which will give everybody a stake in the environmental movement.

In another generation it will be unthinkable for anyone to practice psy-

chotherapy and not include our relations with the natural environment. For if you overlook that, you may well overlook forms of anxiety, depression, and grief that are based not in the family or other social contexts but rather in our relations with the natural world around us.



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**Q** How does ecopsychology address the fact that we are an increasingly urban species?

**A** It's true, many people are now cut off from the natural environment. On a very basic level, they've grown numb to that fact. So ecopsychology begins with trying to awaken people to what they need from their environment. That can be done in a number of emotionally engaging ways—by taking people out into the wilderness, by getting people to spend time in parks and gardens, by teaching them to be mindful that every breath they take connects them with the biosphere, or maybe simply by tend-

ing a potted plant, if that's all there is to work with.

It could well be that a great many people are living with a profound sense of grief about the degradation we are imposing upon the planet. Maybe it's showing up in their dreams; maybe it's showing up as anxiety or depression; certainly it shows up quite dramatically as stress.

Stress managers will tell you that one of their most successful techniques for reducing stress is visualization. If you ask them what people visualize when they wish to relax, they never say parking lots or freeways or baseball stadiums. What do they mention? Well, we know the answer: forests and mountains and sea-coasts.

So if this is what reduces stress and gives people a sense of emotional stability, why not take it seriously? Maybe what we need in every city are more parks and gardens, more places where people can physically connect with what's natural and peaceful, rather than with purely imaginary landscapes or some form of virtual reality.

**Q** You have expressed some criticisms of the messages of the environmental movement. How might we better communicate with the people we're trying to reach?

**A** My own judgment is that the standard things environmentalists have been doing for the last twenty-five years are becoming less and less effective. Environmentalists usually communicate first a sense of doom about the planet's collapse, and then a sense of shame that we have brought this about. They often measure their success by how guilty they make people feel. I've done this myself. I'm not saying these are ineffective techniques, but I think we've probably exhausted the

audience who can be recruited by being scared or scolded.

Similarly, while we don't want to stop providing people with hard information, the problem with facts, figures, and statistics is that they can always be disputed, and they're often too obscure or imponderable to win people's hearts and minds.

The interesting dialogue begins when environmentalists ask what they have to work with besides disaster, blame, and numbers. I believe that human beings have an innate love and loyalty for the natural world. They need to be treated as if they do. There is real joy to be found in nature, and there is heroism in honoring it and preserving it. There is pride to be taken in saving our planet for future generations.

It pays to listen as well as lecture. Environmentalists should value learning what makes people do what they're doing. We need to be patient and respectful enough to listen. When we do, we discover that we have an awful lot to learn about the motivations behind people's environmental habits.

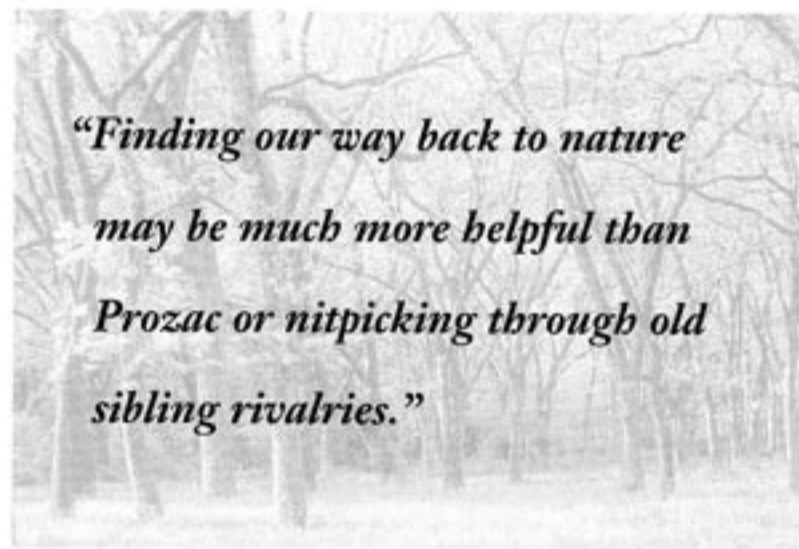
**Q** It seems to me that people are aware that we are hurting the earth, and maybe they even know that it's a self-destructive practice. But the destruction is not slowing down. Even preserving an open space seems to be an uphill battle.

**A** Let me give you an ecopsychological analysis of what you just said. You're telling me that it's a great big problem that's almost impossible to solve. Does it occur to you that you cannot possibly motivate someone on that basis?

A few years ago some people wrote a

book called *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*. The book became very popular. Why? Because it gave people a chance to act. Yes, it was a chance to act in small ways, but as every teacher knows, this is how we begin to change. Small ways lead to big ways. Until you empower people by giving them the possibility of success, they're not going to join you.

Some environmentalists scoffed at the book and responded by publishing a list of 50 difficult ways to save the planet—



things like move out of the city, sell your car, stop having children. What they were doing was heaping ridicule on a rather skillful way to get people involved. This is simply terrible psychology.

I remember when I used to do a lot of environmental speaking. I'm now amazed at how often I presented an audience with an insoluble problem and then lashed them for not joining the cause. Should I be surprised that I left behind an atmosphere of gloom and defeat? What I did was counterproductive. So I've learned not to do that; I've learned to try to be helpful and positive. I can probably be as pessimistic as anybody you could talk to, but I always suggest that there are things that can be done. Giving people someplace to begin and a sense of achievement is applied ecopsychology.

**Q** Okay, but still, it would appear that our culture is much more inclined toward the mall than toward a vision quest.

**A** It's interesting that you should mention that because consumer behavior is one of the major areas of research in ecopsychology. I think the proper way to approach consumerism is not to despair, but rather to ask: Why do people go to the mall? Ecopsychologists have discovered that often people don't go to the mall to shop, they go to find friends. People will tell you that they shop when they are depressed, and that they find all kinds of subsidiary gratification in what they're doing that has absolutely nothing to do with buying merchandise.

What these people are looking for are legitimate things in life—companionship, community, joy. They

think they can find them at the mall. They don't, and then they feel frustrated. So maybe there's a way to help them find what they're really looking for.

To the extent that consumption is an addictive behavior—people often use the language of addiction: "I can't help myself"—therapists can help people find something to put in its place. And to the extent that overconsumption in the developed societies is an environmental issue, we will have a new, more constructive way to deal with the problem.

**Q** You suggest that the "ecological unconscious" can be drawn upon to restore environmental harmony. What do you mean by that?

All psychology in the modern western world is grounded in the concept of the unconscious. Every school of therapy has come up with its own theory of the contents of the unconscious mind. Freud's early theory was that it was filled with infantile sexuality that had never achieved healthy expression; Jung believed that there was a vast collective unconscious containing great religious symbols and teachings.

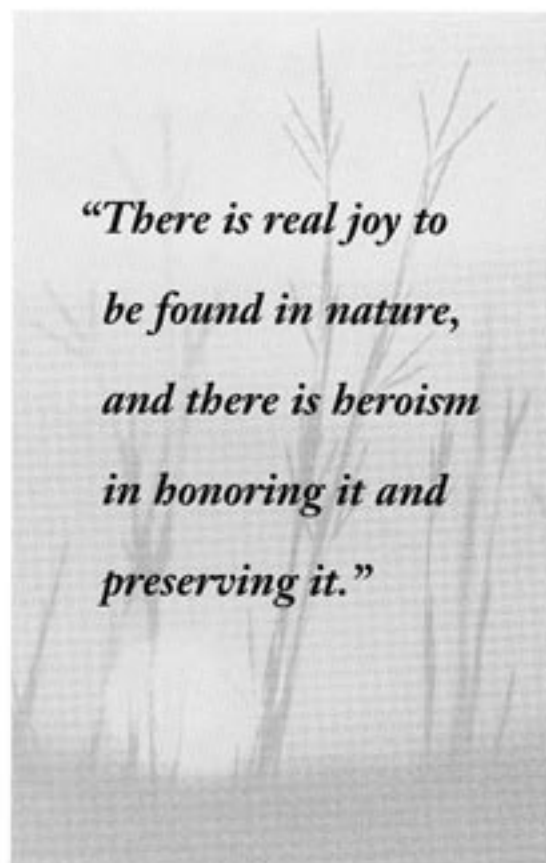
Some ecopsychologists have speculated that, at the deepest level of the human mind, we might find an ecological unconscious. By that they mean a place where we are bound to the earth in a way that is as real as the connection that binds us to our mothers and fathers. In effect, it's another kind of parenthood. And if we don't honor that connection, we will remain discontented, unhappy, and neurotic.

Q Isn't that notion fundamental to some of the earliest cultures?

A Yes, you're right. And in that sense ecopsychology is nothing new. The idea of an ecological unconscious is an awkward, contemporary way of saying something very old. The language of psychology has become, for better or worse, the language we use in the modern world to talk about deeply spiritual things. Freud himself noted that what he did was not very different from what witch doctors did; he recognized that healing the soul was an age-old human practice. Jung recognized that, too. In this regard we have a lot to learn from indigenous cultures.

Q How might a therapist put ecopsychology into practice?

A It would be unthinkable these days if someone came in for therapy and the therapist never mentioned the client's mother or father. We know they're going to talk about those primary relationships, because they're recognized as very important. They form our personalities; they make us sick or they make us healthy.



Therapists should also see our relationship with the natural environment in exactly the same way. They should be asking, "Have you ever gone for a walk in the woods? Have you ever sat down and contemplated a beautiful landscape? No? This is not part of your life?" And the therapist can then help the client find the value in these things. In many cases, it might be what the client needs most urgently.

Of course, therapists must first know and value our bond with the earth in their own experience as part of their training. There may be no way to deal with a client's problems without giving him or

her access to trees, flowers, animals, the sky, the sun, the stars, the moon. If these things are not part of people's lives, they may indeed be suffering. Finding our way back to nature may be much more helpful than Prozac or nitpicking through old sibling rivalries.

Q Is this what you mean by "prescribing nature"?

A Yes. Often people who are deeply troubled quite spontaneously walk out under the stars, look up, and find that their lives have taken on a new dimension. That's one of the most obvious, basic, and universal human experiences. It's almost as if right outside our door, right outside our window, nature itself has given us something that puts our lives in their proper perspective. Again, it's a very old insight—not something exotic or strange.

I believe that when people turn to the natural environment it marks the beginning of a deep appreciation of a basic scientific fact. We are physically—and very probably emotionally—bonded to the planet in ways that require attention, then loyalty, and then love. If we want to be sane, happy, and fulfilled, we need to recognize this truth.

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