© **"IS SELF AN ILLUSION?": A QUESTION FOR THE EARTH**
Theoretical, Clinical, and Environmental Implications
Anthony Rankin Wilson, MSW, RSW

PROLOGUE

"We can believe whatever we please, but that doesn't mean that the universe is going to suit itself to our particular beliefs or our particular capacities." Wilfrid Bion

"One could accuse therapeutic psychology's exaggeration of the personal interior, and aggrandizing of its importance, of being a systematic denial of the world out there, a kind of compensation for the true grandness its theory has refused to include and has defended against." James Hillman

Psychoanalysis is slowly awakening to the reality of the environmental crisis and its' disavowal of humanity's embeddedness within, and dependence upon, the other-than-human world. As far back as 1960, analyst Harold Searles wrote *"that in Freud's own writings, as well as in those of other investigators, it is a rare thing to find explicit acknowledgment paid to the significance of the nonhuman environment in man's psychological life."*1 In June, 2010, the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis sponsored an online seminar, "Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and the Environment: A Dialogue", with international faculty. And in October, 2010, the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London, England, organized a conference, "Engaging With Climate Change: Psychoanalytic Perspectives", where almost two hundred environmentalists, activists, and analysts gathered.

I was born in 1950 on the lip of the 10,000 year old North Saskatchewan River Valley. As I stood on the edge of the river bank, the swift moving water was terrifying and alluring

to me as a child. I kept my distance and usually retreated to the maternal safety of narrow foot trails rising from the flood plain through the trees and hills of the ravine. Here, friends and I would explore for hours, immersed in the natural environment and our imaginative play. I lived inside this river valley as I had once lived inside the contours of my mothers womb. It shaped my experience of "self", of embodiment. My reciprocal relationship with this river and valley is as much a part of my desire to express concern through this paper and to challenge illusory and unsustainable metaphors of "self", as any other relationship I've had, human and other-than-human. [*Note: Other-than-human refers to all living organisms as well as the surface of the planet and the portion of the atmosphere and the subsurface that is capable of supporting life.*]

INTRODUCTION

In May 2001, Jack, a twice a week analytic psychotherapy patient whom I'd been seeing for 6 years, told me excitedly that he'd just purchased two jet-skis. Seemingly out-of-the-blue, I became confused. Should I mirror his enthusiasm that assumed a shared understanding between us that his longstanding fear of play, and its' potential for emotional exposure, was perhaps giving way to an increased capacity for autonomous self-expression and pleasure? But what of the implications of his purchases for the nesting shorebirds, the lake-water, and the air to be filled with yet more sound and carbon dioxide? I had been reading about environmental concerns and their implications for psychoanalysis and psychotherapy since the early 90's. My own reflections had remained largely intellectualized...until this session. Now, in these moments between Jack and I, it was shockingly not so clear to me where my allegiances lay. Yes, my professional responsibility was to serve Jack and his psychological maturation. But what of the Earth in crisis? What of the

words of Australian ecologist, John Seed? *"I try to remember that it's not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rain forest. Rather, I am part of the rainforest protecting itself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking."*2 I chose to mirror Jack and keep the contents of my bifurcated mind to myself. However...these moments opened a fissure in my thinking that has remained open, indeed widened, and through which has poured a steady flow of questions and the unsettling feeling that my clinical meaning-making foundations are being eroded, parameters breached.

Five years into the psychotherapy of Frank, a husband, father, and successful businessman in his early 40's, he told me of bludgeoning, with a shovel, a Massassauga Rattlesnake that had ventured near his cottage. This snake is a threatened species and familiar to me from experiences canoe camping in the backcountry north of my home city. I experienced visceral shock and outrage as Frank told me his story and had to willfully direct my empathic focus towards him and away from the snake who, in those initial moments, became my primary figure of identification. This vignette, like the other, is pertinent to our explorations for several reasons.

First, it illustrates the clinical dilemma of a psychotherapist "self" bred in the metaphors of an interior-spatial, skin-encapsulated isolated mind, whose current experience is increasingly one where the boundaries of "self" are not so clear. I believe these confusing clinical experiences will become more common as symptoms of the environmental crisis increasingly enter our session rooms, and as analysts awaken to this reality. Frank knew I had environmental interests and concerns and was very fearful of relating this experience. His adaptive "good boy" had relationally navigated a belligerent, critical father, and an emotionally-absent mother, by becoming a handyman ever eager to fix

things for his parents. The handyman was terrified that he could not "fix" this between us. Over time we were able to navigate this territory and utilize it to soften his rigid, compensatory, inferior-superior structures of pathological accommodation. Eventually Frank began to speak of his rattlesnake remorse and open to his own identification with the snake as a way to access how he felt when facing his father's sudden enraged attacks.

These vignettes also raise such clinical questions as: if a person's sense of "self", made acutely aware by the environmental crisis of its' delusional metaphoric boundaries, begins to extend its' perimeter beyond human identifications to include a natural world in distress - rivers, rattlesnakes, soil - how will we as analysts and psychotherapists relate to, understand, and metabolize experiences such as the ones I briefly describe with Jack and Frank? Of course, we hold a therapeutic allegiance that privileges our patient's well-being. But what of the well-being of ecologies that make possible and sustain our existence? What happens in the analyst, and between analyst and patient, when the patient's needs and environmental needs clearly conflict? How will clinicians relate to patients who bring feelings of conflict between their lifestyles, their identities, and their experience of, or their hearing the spreading news of, deteriorating ecosystems? As reports of the environmental crisis increasingly break through personal narcissistic bubbles of security and belief in the future, what becomes of denial and disavowal? And, how to clinically respond to another patient of mine who said, "there's nothing to lose, we're all fucked anyway", recognizing that this may be an indicator of what scientist Tim Flannery calls *"after population, the greatest obstacle in our path to sustainability...discounting the future."*3

Psychoanalysis, through the maturing theories and methods of the Self Psychologists, Intersubjectivists, and Relationalists, has been steadily evolving towards a concept of

"self" that is more *"allied with the round intelligence of the animate Earth."*4 Indeed, in 1992, George Atwood and Robert Stolorow, wrote: *"...the image of the isolated mind represents modern man's alienation from nature...This distinction diminishes the experience of the inescapable physical embodiment of the human self and thereby attenuates a sense of being wholly subject to the conditions and cycles of biological existence. These conditions include absolute dependence on the physical environment, kinship to other animals, subjection to biological rhythms and needs, and, perhaps most important, man's physical vulnerability and ultimate mortality...Insofar as the being of man is defined and located in mind, existing as an entity apart from the embeddedness of the body in the biological world, an illusion can be maintained that there is a sphere of inner freedom from the constraints of animal existence and mortality."5* It is this illusion of the isolated mind, or, in other words, the limited metaphor of an interior spatial "self", that we will soon explore, but first, a brief commentary on the crisis. Read what follows as a list of well-diagnosed, documented symptoms of not just environmental distress, but of the interior-spatial "self" as well, isolated and split-off from the wider circumference of what's been called the *"ecological self"*.6

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

For many of us the environmental crisis remains an abstraction. It is something that is, or might be, happening somewhere else to someone else, or might happen sometime in the distant future, or is an unlikely eventuality due to the wonders of science and human ingenuity. And, perhaps, it is for others something so destructive and horrific that it defies thoughtful reflection. We do know that ignorance or such environmental mismanagement as overfishing, extermination of other species, and deforestation have played significant

roles in the collapse of past societies. We in the 21st century are facing the unprecedented twin threats of climate and ocean change due to the human activity of releasing ever-increasing amounts of carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. The human impact on climate was first identified by a Swedish chemist in the late 19th century. In spite of attempts to deny or minimize its significance ever since, the scientific evidence of the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has been steadily accumulating. In May, 2010, leading scientists, including 11 Nobel laureates, published a letter in the journal Science, saying: *"There is compelling and consistent evidence that humans are changing the climate in ways that threaten our societies and the ecosystems on which we depend...Society has two choices: we can ignore the science and hide our heads in the sand and hope we are lucky, or we can act in the public interest to reduce the threat of global climate change quickly and substantively."*[7]

Other scientists, who are studying the changes in our oceans due to the absorption of carbon dioxide and heat created by climate change, believe that we are altering *"the ocean's acidity, patterns of saltiness, temperature, volume, ice cover, function within the planet's carbon and oxygen cycles, and possibly the physical structure of the currents as well...*[the] *changes to the atmosphere are serious...but...changes to the ocean are far more so. The ocean is a bigger system. It's more critical to the life support of the planet."*[8]

This brief commentary on the environmental crisis invites you to pause and consider your own experience of concern. Are you aware of a vague state of anxiety about the crisis, and a sense of being overwhelmed? Can you locate defenses such as minimization, denial, and disavowal? This pause is important before moving on to our contemplations of the "self".

This paper's proposition is that we *must* reformulate and extend our metaphor of the "self" to include the outer environments in which we are physically and psychologically embedded. Our physical selves, for example, are continuous with the elements of air and water that circulate through us. Given mind-body unity, the state of these elements is as fundamental to our psychological well-being as it is fundamental to the state of our physical health. And I use the word *"must"* with intention, as a means to arouse you to the urgency of the role 21st century psychoanalysis and depth psychotherapy is called to play in treating the human psychological symptoms of the environmental crisis appearing in our offices, and that will be increasingly manifesting in the future. This urgency extends to the important societal role of offering our insights into human motivation, behavior, and change to other disciplines that are taking concerned action towards creating awareness of the crisis and nurturing resilient, sustainable societies...for present, and future, generations.

THE SELF

"The self has been the central and most important concept in psychoanalytic theorizing of the past several decades. The most striking thing about the concept of self within current psychoanalytic thought is precisely the startling contrast between the centrality of concern with self and the enormous variability and lack of consensus about what the term even means."[9] Stephen Mitchell wrote this in 1993, and though in the intervening years there has been progress in articulating further notions of what the "self" is, or is not, his point still stands. Though Self Psychology, Intersubjectivity Theory, and Relational Psychoanalysis have made great strides in balancing the emphasis on the "spatial self" with the historically and theoretically more absent "temporal self" metaphor, most of us may

remain conceptually limited by the notion of a "self" that is interior, layered, with a core, and is bounded by the skin. This is akin to Atwood and Stolorow's isolated mind.

Amidst such variability and lack of consensus about what the "self" is, also consider that *"...The notion of an individual self as an ideal with collective resonance did not take root...until the late eighteenth century...."*.10 Historian Dror Wahrman has noted that the concept of identity, or "self", contains within it a serviceable tension between two apparently contradictory impulses: identity as the unique individuality of a person, and identity as a common denominator that situates an individual within a group.11 In Wahrmans' view, no one can possibly have an exclusively individual identity, nor be nothing but a member of a group. However, these individualizing and generalizing components of selfhood can mix in various proportions, and these proportions are, and have historically been, subject to change. He believes that the modern notion of "self" began to emerge after 1780. As others have noted, there had never been a time when *"such individuality was resonant with the collective consciousness and was a goal for everyone...*[and that]*...The emergent self-structure forming the base of that individuality strongly elevated the value of separation"*12 over a "self" that is part of a wider context. And consequently, as Mitchell notes in a reference to Sass, *"according to many historians, concern about the self is the central theme of the last several centuries of Western culture."*13

Mitchell importantly writes that *"self-reflection has become a preoccupying concern"*14 on various levels: global, international, national, and individual. He points out that psychoanalysis, with its focus on the "self", has reflected this multi-level preoccupation of the last half of the twentieth century. This stability-seeking preoccupation has risen amidst the gusting philosophical winds of deconstructive perspectivism. Indeed, psychoanalysis has

*"helped to create our contemporary western concepts of self...and remains one of our most precious methods for understanding, protecting, and developing our sense of self, both individually and as a culture."*15

Acknowledging Mitchell's insightful writing on psychoanalysis's *"two different models or accounts of self...self as layered, singular, and continuous* [the spatial metaphor of self] *and self as multiple and discontinuous* [the temporal metaphor of self]"16, it is the evolving theories of Self Psychology, Intersubjectivity Theory, and Relational Psychoanalysis that have begun to swing the pendulum towards the center of Wahrman's creative tension. This is the swing between the individual, skin-encapsulated "self", and the "self" that is part of wider contexts like family, society, and as I highlight, ecosystems. They have done this through their attempts to balance the spatial metaphor of a singular and continuous "self" that is *"independent of shifts over time"*17, with the temporal metaphor of a multiple and discontinuous "self" that is variable and changes through time depending on relational context. In Stolorow's words: *"...we are recasting psychoanalysis as a contextual psychology, which recognizes the constitutive role of relatedness in the making of all experience. Experiential worlds and intersubjective fields are seen to mutually constitute one another."* 18 The meanings of *"contextual"* and *"relatedness"* and *"mutually constitute one another"* need to expand beyond human relations to include the other-than-human environment. Not only do the times in which we live require this, so do the imperative realities of systems science.

Psychiatrist Mark Epstein writes that "*as the interpersonal psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan put it in 1938, the belief in a unique personal individuality, endemic among psychotherapists and their patients, is "the very mother of illusions.""*19 This is, as Mitchell

notes, a narcissistic illusion *"in the service of allaying anxiety and distracting attention from ways in which people actually operate with others."*[20] We need to extend the meaning of *"others"* from its' narrow reference to human others and include the other-than-human world of others - bees, aquifers, the oaks. This is the scope of an "ecological self". Because of identifications that extend beyond other humans and human relations to the other-than-human world, the "ecological self" perceives, and empathically feels, how *"people actually operate"* with the ecosphere. And, as a self might do with an empathically engaged concern for another person, acts in ways to express this concern.

Before turning from this brief excursion into the evolving nature of the "self" concept towards a short summary of clinical relevancies, let's review the conventional notion of "self" that has dominated our thinking, and what Gregory Bateson has called *"the epistemological error of Occidental civilization".*[21] Buddhist and general systems theory scholar, Joanna Macy, writes: *"The self is the metaphoric construct of identity and agency, the hypothetical piece of turf on which we construct our strategies for survival, the notion around which we focus our instincts for self-preservation, our needs for self-approval, and the boundaries of our self-interest."*[22] This version of "self" is being replaced by *"wider constructs of identity and self-interest - by what philosopher Arne Naess termed the "ecological self", coextensive with other beings and the life of our planet."*[23] This replacement is in some ways a revival of a consciousness at one time present in many cultures. Aboriginal peoples would consider our conception of the "self" as a distinctive whole *"set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background* [as a] *rather peculiar idea...".*[24]

Macy describes two factors that have contributed to the dismantling of the modern illusion of a continuous, skin-encapsulated "self". First, she says that this "self" is being *"psychologically and spiritually challenged by confrontation with dangers of mass annihilation...and* [second that]...*From living systems theory and systems cybernetics emerges a process view of the self as inseparable from the web of relationships that sustain it".*25 This shift to a more encompassing metaphor of "self" is partly a function of the unprecedented, overwhelming dangers that we now face. *"The loss of certainty that there will be a future is...the pivotal psychological reality of our time",*26 Macy writes. It is this sense of the *"environmental irreparable"*27 that permeates the psychological atmosphere of the early 21st century Western mind, tears at the skin of the interior-spatial "self", and contributes to psychopathology often attributed exclusively to other causes. A focus on the psychopathology of apathy will begin our clinical reflections.

THE ECOLOGICAL SELF in CLINICAL CONTEXT

"Relational patterns evolve from dyads, families, communities, and cultures - and those interlocking networks of meaning originate in a material and earthly environmental field."
Susan Bodnar

If we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, evidence is mounting of the planet's distressed life support systems. From the loss of biodiversity and the mass extinction of species to climate/ocean change, it is overwhelming to contemplate what this actually means, particularly for the isolated mind of the illusory interior-spatial "self". Apathy, far from its commonly understood meaning of being free from or insensitive to suffering, is actually a reaction similar to the freezing and paralysis that occurs when the overwhelming traumatic nature of endangerment triggers a shut-down of the fight-flight response. Numb-

ness, dissociation, and hair-trigger defensive rage may all be reactions to the experience of being overwhelmed and may subsequently manifest as apathy. For many citizens who are attuned to the severity of the crisis and the need for individual and socio-political action, the apathy of others is a bewildering phenomenon. Our clinical understandings of trauma, defense, and pathological accommodation have much to offer here.

A patient recently told me of her nine year old son asking a litany of anxious bedtime questions: *"Why aren't we saving polar bears?...When is the world going to blow up?... When won't we be able to breathe or drink water?"*

An analyst posts in the IARPP seminar: *"Children have never before been enlisted in a project as daunting as rescuing their very means of existence. Children are aware of other children so allergic to environmental allergens that their lives depend upon avoidance. I think few of us my age saw the environment as potentially toxic in this way...How should we respond to our child patients' environmental anxieties? Are they different from our own?"*

In April, 2011, a patient relates this dream: *"last night I dreamt that global warming was happening sooner than anyone expected, like not 100 years from now...but now. I felt a kind of passive resignation...that this big thing was happening and I could do nothing about it."* The same patient spoke of another dream several months later: *"I was in a forest, but the land was being sold and I somehow had to experience this forest before it was gone."*

Colleagues have told me that they aren't hearing their patients speak about the environmental crisis, that the crisis is not showing up in their session rooms. The clinical literature notes, largely in the writings of Ecopsychology, that once the significance of the role of

nature in human psychology is appreciated by the analyst, then previously unheard or misunderstood content becomes apparent. Following from this, the *"global warming"* and *"forest"* of my patient's dreams are related to not only as personal metaphors but as possible indicators of an ecological "self", and an inclusive unconscious process that is attuned to natural systems in distress. How we clinicians engage such indicators will depend upon the processing of our own beliefs, feelings, and defenses regarding the environmental crisis. This engagement will determine whether we hear the voice of the earth and move towards the empathic diagnosis and treatment of such potential human symptoms of planetary distress as *"obliterative drinking and dissociative materialism";*[28] failures in *"psycho-somatic indwelling";*[29] depersonalization and body disidentification; various kinds of abuse; ubiquitous anxiety; vague or acute senses of loss, grief, and displacement; and rising defensive employment of disavowal and denial.

CONCLUSION

""The...torsions within the planetary climate are at last forcing humankind out of its self-enclosed oblivion - a dynamic spoken of in psychoanalysis as the return of the repressed."
David Abram
"To dare to be aware of the facts of the universe in which we are existing calls for courage." Wilfrid Bion

Psychoanalysis began with the "*mind-bound interplay of ego, id, and superego...then the field broadened to take into account interpersonal forces...then it took a huge leap to look at whole families and systems of people...then...social systems...".*[30] It is time for another leap to include ecological systems, and indeed, our whole inter-connected planet. The illusory primacy of the interior-spatial "self" has been slowly eroding. Self Psychology,

Intersubjectivity Theory, and Relational Psychoanalysis have contributed much to this necessary erosion of a conceptual illusion. And the metaphor of an extended, "ecological self", grounded in the fundamental realities revealed through systems science, must take its' place. This will enable us to be more conscious of, and deeply feel, our kinship with the natural world, and from that empathic ground, experience and mourn the loss of cherished landscapes and ways of life. Environmentally-minded analysts and psychotherapists can then express their felt concern for the environment through attention to the symptoms of the environmental crisis as they arise in themselves, and their patients. Experiencing ones analyst "self" as an environmentally-minded "ecological self" increases the possibility of recognizing and attuning to patients' denial or disavowal of the crisis and their deadened states of apathy and lack of concern. Such embodied attunement may also arouse our recognition of, and empathy for, their grief and loss, their profound anxiety about the future, and their ecologically misattuned vigilant protectionism of fragile bubbles of identity that attempt to make 21st century life somehow bearable. There is, then, the potential for discovering their own curious, courageous, and concerned "ecological self" that is more in harmony with "the round intelligence of the earth" than perhaps they have experienced before, or imagined.

POSTSCRIPT

Between July 2012 and November 2013, I conducted a series of hour-long recorded interviews, in Toronto, with 7 women and 5 men, aged 47 to 72 years: 6 psychoanalysts, a Jungian analyst, and 5 analytic psychotherapists, with all but the Jungian practicing from a relational, intersubjective, and/or self psychological psychoanalytic perspective. Beginning with stories of experience with the other-than-human, then moving to reflections

on the environmental crisis, the interview concluded with interviewees' thoughts about whether signs of the crisis were appearing in sessions through patient narratives, dreams, anxieties, dilemmas, and behavioral enactments. The interviews were then transcribed.

Abridged excerpts with brief clinical commentary were the ground of a paper presented at the June, 2015 IARPP Annual Conference in Toronto. It was one of three papers in the panel session, "The Environmental Pulse: Characterizations of the Relational Center." Fellow panel members, analysts Elizabeth Allured and Susan Bodnar, also presented their respective papers, "From Dissociation and Enactment to Conscious Intersubjectivity: Living and Working in the Environmental Crisis"; and "Two Hearts Beating As One". The panel was moderated by TICP member and analyst, Sarah Turnbull.

A version of the above panel paper will appear in the December 2015 edition of TICP's Bulletin and will be presented, along with Elizabeth Allured's paper, at the October 2015 International Self Psychology Conference in Los Angeles.

REFERENCES

1 Searles, Harold., *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and in Schizophrenia*, International Universities Press, 1960, p. 5.
2 Macy, J., *World as Lover, World as Self*, Parallax Press, 2007, p. 150.
3 Flannery, T., *Here On Earth: A New Beginning*, Penguin Books, 2010, p. 211.
4 Abram, D., *The Big Ideas of 2012*, Adbusters, 2011.
5 Atwood, GE, Stolorow, RD, *Contexts of Being: The Intersubjective Foundations of Psychological Life*, The Analytic Press, 1992, p. 8.
6 Buzzell, L., Chalquist, C., *Ecotherapy: Healing With Nature in Mind*, Sierra Club Books, 2009, p. 238.
7 CBC on-line News, *Climate change science sound: researchers*, May 6, 2010.
8 Mitchell, A., *Sea Sick: The Global Ocean in Crisis*, McClelland and Stewart, 2009, p. 8, p.11.
9 Mitchell, SA, *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*, Basic Books, 1993, p. 99.
10 Schwartz-Salant, N., *The Black Nightgown: The Fusional Complex and the Unlived Life*, Chiron Publications, 2007, p. 173.
11 Wahrman, Dror, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
12 Schwartz-Salant, *The Black Nightgown*, p. 175.
13 Mitchell, *Hope and Dread*..., p. 100.
14 ibid., p. 100.
15 ibid., pp. 100-101.
16 ibid., p. 101.
17 ibid., p. 107.
18 Buirski, P., Haglund, P., *Making Sense Together: The Intersubjective Approach to Psychotherapy*, Jason Aronson, 2001, xiii.
19 Epstein, M.,*Thoughts Without a Thinker*, Basic Books, 1995, p. 152.
20 Mitchell, *Hope and Dread*..., p. 106.
21 Buzzell, Chalquist, *Ecotherapy*..., p. 238.
22 ibid., p. 238.
23 ibid., p. 238.
24 Mitchell, *Hope and Dread*..., p. 110.
25 Buzzell, Chalquist, *Ecotherapy*..., p. 240.
26 ibid., p. 241.
27 Lertzman, R., *Exploring Anxious Dimensions of the Irreparable: Considerations from Psychoanalysis*, paper presented at 9th Biennial Conference on Communication and and the Environment, June, 2007.
28 Bodnar, S., *Wasted and Bombed: Clinical Enactments of a Changing Relationship to the Earth*, Psychoanalytic Dialogues, July 2008, p. 484.
29 Atwood, Stolorow, *Contexts of Being*, p. 47.
30 Smith, DB, *Is There an Ecological Unconscious?*, NY Times.com, January 31, 2010.