

# TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND THE ECOLOGICAL CONSCIENCE

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*ABSTRACT:* In an effort to save the environment, many existing education methods concentrate on pumping out factual information and a continual stream of pressing crises that ultimately create a feeling of “well-informed futility,” rather than cultivating what Aldo Leopold called “the Ecological Conscience” rooted in emotional-bonding with nature. While over 90% of the general public agrees with the goals of the environmental movement, just how to educate and motivate people to live and act in accord with ecological balance, is unclear. Suggested here are five pathways to developing an ecological conscience, concluding that the most effective path is through having powerful exceptional experiences with nature that evoke strong emotional bonding – “Significant Life Experiences,” “Exceptional Human Experiences,” or Jung’s concept of “synchronicity.” A variety of exceptional nature-bonding experiences are described, many of which have transpersonal qualities. Often such experiences occur associated with visiting special sacred places.

On a foggy February morning in 1905, Gifford Pinchot, Chief Forester in the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt, slowly rode his horse, “Jim,” through Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. Pinchot was depressed and perplexed, for his close friend President Roosevelt had asked him to come up with a single unitive policy directive that could be used to guide resource management for a wide variety of issues including fisheries, wildlife, forestry, public grazing lands, mining and mineral leasing, oil drilling, park lands, and so on. Pinchot found the magnitude and complexity of the assignment overwhelming, despite years of training at Yale and in Europe.

As he rode, in as much of a fog inside as in the world around him, suddenly Pinchot found his mind descending into what he later called “a long dark tunnel.” Arriving at the end of the tunnel, he saw a wild landscape in India where he recalled there were large natural areas called “conservancies” that were managed for the good of everyone. The words “the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time” came to mind.

Pinchot raced back to the White House and rushed into the Oval Office to relate his experience. Roosevelt became so excited that he called a special cabinet meeting that evening. During that session Secretary McGee coined the word *conservation* to describe the new comprehensive resource policy of the Roosevelt Administration which was defined as: “The wise use of natural resources for the greatest number of people for the longest time” (Pinchot, 1947, p. 40).

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Pinchot's experience is what is called an "adamic ecstasy" (Beer, 2000; Laski, 1961): a sudden realization of unity emerging from depression created by a sense of chaos and confusion. Such an experience might seem like an anomaly, but actually such exceptional experiences in nature like Pinchot's are not uncommon.

Sixty-four years later, in 1969, inspired by the international movement building toward Earth Day in 1970, a group of faculty and students at the University of Michigan met in a seminar to envision a new direction for shaping educational policy about the environment. The name for this new educational thrust became "Environmental Education," which they defined as follows: "The purpose of environmental education is to develop a citizenry which is knowledgeable concerning the biophysical environment and its associated problems, aware of how to help resolve these problems, and motivated to do so" (Stapp et al., 1970, p. 30).

In contrast to earlier educational methods called "Outdoor Education," which taught outdoor recreation skills, "Nature Study Education" that focused on field biology and identification, and "Conservation Education" that provided people with resource conservation information about soil conservation and forestry, Environmental Education's focus would be on developing concern for the quality of the entire biophysical environment—natural and man-made—and motivating people to preserve environmental quality as well as being better-informed (Swan, 1969).

There is little argument about the need for environmental education and action nearly four decades later. The big issue, then and now, is how to effectively educate and motivate people to care about ecology so their concern translates into appropriate action. The role of psychology in creating ecological harmony is crucial, and both then, and now, it is not nearly as clear as we might hope for.

#### NATURE AND PSYCHOLOGY

The first religions were all rooted in nature. Nature and psychology in those times were closely interwoven. The split from nature in consciousness and its causes is a subject far too broad to discuss here, and there are a number of books that have been written about this, as well as calling for a restoration of nature and spirituality (Berry, 1988; Glendinning, 1994; Metzner, 1999; Roszak, 1992; Shepard, 1992).

The re-interest in reintegrating consciousness and nature began in the United States in the 1880's as awareness of damage to natural resources caused by modern civilization grew. Paul Brooks (1980) has written a very detailed accounting of many of the early literary naturalists—Thoreau, Emerson, Grinnell, Burroughs, etc.—whose writings called attention to what modern society was doing to nature and the spiritual values of nature.

More recently, philosophers including Warwick Fox (1990) and Arne Naess (1989), have proposed philosophies—Ecosophy and Deep Ecology—as a way to reconnect with nature; and political historian Theodore Roszak (1992) and others (Roszak, Gomes & Kramer, [1995]) have developed a new psychology, Ecopsychology, which already has a number of different approaches—Radical Ecopsychology, Applied Ecopsychology, etc.—and some disagreements about which is the proper one (Reser, 1995).

Meanwhile, the fields of environmental psychology, environmental education, ecological psychology, green psychology, ecotherapy and most recently conservation psychology, have also been developing, as have the general fields of environmental studies, ecology, field biology, environmental health, human ecology, etc. All too often these fields and theories operate in isolation from each other, or in competition, which results in fragmentation and lack of synergy towards solving the problems of the earth. To be truly effective, we must find areas of common agreement to bridge disciplines and efforts, as well as encourage multiple points of view and theories.

Michael Hutton (2003), in his review of *Radical Ecology*, stated that as of 2003 relatively little had been written about the mind and nature in transpersonal psychology. Since then, there certainly has been more work done in this area, but one area that warrants more extensive attention is the study of how place, especially sacred places, affect consciousness.

The converse is true for environmental studies, environmental education and environmental psychology. In those journals and magazines, transpersonal psychology is hardly ever mentioned, although spiritual traditions, especially Buddhism and native religions are sometimes presented as paths to nature kinship.

The schism between environmentalism and psychology, especially transpersonal psychology, is unfortunate as there is a growing body of research in environmental education, which has direct relevance to transpersonal psychology. In this article I will describe research on transpersonal experiences associated with sacred places, and suggest that a unitive concept to bring ecology and psychology together is Aldo Leopold's "Ecological Conscience," which Leopold said is rooted in a "Land Ethic" that leads one to know that "... a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong otherwise" (Leopold, 1949, p. 240).

Leopold, who founded the field of wildlife management, speaks of a state of consciousness based not on knowledge alone, but on an intuitive understanding of the web of life. In his own words, "Possibly in our intuitive perceptions, which may be truer than our science and less impeded by words than our philosophies, we realize the indivisibility of the earth – its soil, mountains, rivers, forests, climate, plants and animals, and respect it collectively not only as a useful servant but a living being"(Flader, 1974, p.18).

## THE FIVE PATHWAYS TO NATURE KINSHIP

I was part of the group that created the original definition of environmental education that has since become the standard around the world. We knew what we wanted to create—an environmentally aware and well-informed citizenry that could undertake constructive actions to resolve environmental problems and preserve nature— but we were not certain about how to develop the most effective strategies, for never before had there been a goal to create a citizenry that would be active in environmental problem-solving.

In 1969, when I studied the attitudes and political actions of inner-city high school students in Detroit, I found there was no correlation between how much they knew about the facts of air pollution and how strongly they felt about it, even though they lived in an area with dustfalls in excess of 100 tons per square mile per month (Swan, 1970).

This finding is consistent with research on political attitude formation. Reading helps strengthen what already exists more than initiating new attitudes. It seemed clear that something else was needed to reliably form environmental attitudes that moved people to action.

In 1969 I met Abraham Maslow and asked for his advice on creating the most effective environmental educational strategies. He advised that to uncover what moved people to develop a passionate love for nature I should follow his approach to self-actualization research and study people, both famous and unknown, living and dead, who were dedicated to ecological balance, in hopes of finding what forces moved them to develop such a strong love for nature. He added that in his studies he had found that a common quality of self-actualizing people was the love of nature.

Since that meeting I have surveyed and interviewed hundreds of ecologically concerned people, pored through biographies and explored the psychology among traditional cultures including American Indians, Inuit, Ainu, Polynesians and Australian Aborigines. The process has truly been in the spirit of organic inquiry (Clements, 2004).

What emerges is that there are five paths that lead to developing a deep and enduring love of nature (Swan, 2000). Not everyone fits neatly into just one category, and it is often true that by seriously following one path, one comes to embrace several others, but they all ultimately lead to one common end—a passionate, life-inspiring, healing love for nature that is a touchstone of being and a driving force behind conservation action.

### *1. Becoming Well-Informed*

I have found only two leaders of conservation who felt that they became committed to serious ecological action through information exposure.

J.I. Rodale, organic and health publisher and founder of Rodale Press and the Rodale Institute, was a New York City grocer who started reading about organic food. He convinced himself to start publishing, first as a hobby, and then with *Organic Gardening* magazine. The business grew and he and his family resettled to Emmaus, PA, where they have established Rodale Farms and a major publishing business.

A second is Dr. Albert Baez, world-renown physicist and science educator who switched careers and became director of education for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. He told me that his career change was based on reading volumes of scientific studies about the pollution of the biosphere.

I am sure there are others, especially in the scientific and academic communities, but these two gentlemen stand out as being unique leaders that followed this approach.

## 2. *Serving A Sense of Social Justice*

Many people who join the environmental movement see pollution and extinction of animals and plants as just one more example of the injustices inherent in our socio-political system. People on this path may not be ardent naturalists, and may spend little time in natural areas, at least when they begin, but nonetheless they are ready to throw themselves into ecological battles because they feel it is the right thing to do for a just society. Ralph Nader is a good example of someone becoming an ecological crusader because of a strong social conscience. So was the archdruid of social protest, Saul Alinsky, whose teachings on the strategies and ethics of political activism remain a touchstone for many eco-activists (Alinsky, 1971). Some modern entertainers who have joined the environmental movement seem to come from the motivation of social justice more than ecological savvy or familiarity with natural history, at least initially.

## 3. *Concern for Personal and Public Health*

Fred Soyka, author of the groundbreaking popular book on air ionization *The Ion Effect* (1983) developed an interest in air chemistry by his discovery that his long bout with a strange chronic physical and emotional sickness was due to his sensitivity to “something electrical in the air,” that we now understand to be negative air ion deficiency. Barry Commoner, author of the immensely popular study of ecology and the future, *The Closing Circle* (1971), became interested in ecological issues through studying public health dangers arising from fallout from atmospheric testing of nuclear devices. Farm worker activist Caesar Chavez’s concern for pesticides also seems to fall within the social justice motivational pathway to eco-activism.

A number of people report that they discovered the healing powers of nature when they sought out natural areas to escape from dysfunctional families and

abusive relationships. John Muir spent most of his childhood in Scotland, then later in the woods of Wisconsin, escaping from a tyrannical father. Nature writer John Burroughs escaped an unhappy marriage by retreating to the woods.

John Annoni (2009) escaped from a dysfunctional family and spent as much time as he could in the woods, which ultimately led him to develop a love for nature through hunting and fishing. Upon graduation from high school, Annoni went to college and earned teaching credentials. He then returned to his roots to work with inner-city children. Today, Annoni directs Camp Compass, which takes inner-city kids from Pennsylvania projects and teaches them ethics and outdoor skills as a path to personal growth and self-reliance.

Actor Tom Skerritt, who played “Reverend Maclean” in Robert Redford’s “A River Runs Through It,” and is a member of the Board of Directors of the American Rivers conservation organization, says that his passion for conservation began when his grandfather took him to a cottage on Lake Erie, and he saw the beaches littered with dead fish from pollution (Swan, 2010).

#### *4. Seeking Personal Health and Fitness*

The fourth path to ecological advocacy comes from an awareness of how health and fitness are linked to ecological quality. People on this path, such as Rudolph Steiner or Robert Rodale, felt strongly about the need to buy and eat organic foods, get more exercise, meditate or do yoga, and live and work in clean and safe environments. A visceral concern for ecological quality that originates from self-interest is generally much stronger and longer lasting than a purely cerebral one. Eating your way to ecological awareness is an effective way to establish an ecological conscience because you develop a feeling sense of the rightness of what you do in your body as well as knowing it in your head. What is good for nature is generally good for your own nature.

In a study of 126 people who reported having had some kind of extraordinary experience with nature as children and/or adults, Samantha Dowdall found that 68% of her interviewees saw this as an integral root of their being, and a reason why they retreated to nature to heal (Dowdall, 1998).

#### *5. Profound Emotional/Spiritual Experiences*

While there are many paths to becoming a committed conservationist, almost all dedicated conservationists can trace their passion for nature to exceptional emotional experiences: early positive encounters with nature involving intense beauty and wonder in childhood, usually in the presence of loving adults; and later, in adulthood, extraordinary moments filled with healing, creative inspiration and spiritual qualities that may have a transpersonal dimension (Swan, 2000).

Clearly, one person who would agree with the importance of early experience in developing an ecological conscience is singer Pete Seeger, who has become a leader in fighting pollution of the Hudson River with his sailing craft *Clearwater*. Pete, who calls himself an “econik,” traces his childhood roots of love for nature to many long hours spent playing cowboys and Indians in the woods. Seeger told me that he nearly always took the part of the Indians.

Actor Robert Redford, an ardent environmentalist, links his lifelong commitment to ecological issues to a childhood visit to Yosemite Valley where he was deeply moved by the beauty of nature. Another actor with a commitment to conservation, Jameson Parker, star of numerous movies and the hit television series, “Simon and Simon,” vividly recalls childhood summers in Vermont when he was allowed to roam the woods freely and he found fascination with seeing how close he could approach animals (J. Parker, personal communication, June 15, 1998).

Both David Brower and Loren Eiseley trace the origins of their fondness for nature to helping ailing parents stay in touch with the world: Brower’s mother went blind and he had to become her “eyes;” Eiseley’s mother was deaf, and as a result he developed a kind of sensory communication with her. His parents’ marriage, however, was dysfunctional and he spent considerable time in his youth exploring caves and creek banks around his yard, which he later used in his writings (Anderson, n.d.).

In his childhood, Aldo Leopold spent many hours along the Mississippi River in Iowa, where he kept a log of migrating birds. Leopold’s family spent summers in Michigan’s Les Cheneaux Islands, where today there is an Aldo Leopold Preserve on Marquette Island. By the time Leopold went off to prep school, his nickname was “The Naturalist.” These experiences moved him to study forestry at Yale, become an advocate for wilderness and ultimately the world’s first professor of wildlife management (Meine, 1988).

I asked Leopold’s biographer, Curt Meine, if Aldo Leopold had ever had any special spiritual experiences in nature. Aside from a near-death experience in a storm in the Southwest, Meine did not know of any but he noted that in *A Sand County Almanac* Leopold wrote:

What value has wildlife from the standpoint of morals and religion? I heard of a boy once who was brought up an atheist. He changed his mind when he saw that there were a hundred-odd species of warblers, each bedecked like to the rainbow, and each performing yearly sundry thousands of miles of migration about which scientists wrote wisely but did not understand. No “fortuitous concourse of elements” working blindly through any number of millions of years could account for why warblers are so beautiful. No mechanistic theory, even bolstered by mutations, has ever quite answered for the colors of the cerulean warbler, or the vespers of the wood thrush, or the swansong, or goose music. I dare say this boy’s convictions would be harder to shake than those of many inductive theologians. There are yet many boys to be born who, like Isaiah, may see, and know and

consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this. (p. 230)

Curt Meine, wrote

At one point I asked Aldo's brother Frederick, still alive in the early 1990s, if he thought Aldo might have been describing himself in that passage. Frederick thought it was likely. Pretty astounding passage, in fact. It points to some variety of conversion, though not one that fits within the monotheistic traditions. It also, to me, suggests the utter significance of Leopold's aesthetic in informing both his science and his spirituality. (C. Meine, personal communication, July 19, 2009)

Undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau spoke with deep reverence of that transformational moment in his life when he made the first underwater descent with his invention, the aqua-lung (Cousteau, 1953).

Rachel Carson's mother taught her at home, spending many long hours studying nature first-hand. Later as an adult she found that retreating alone to seacoasts, such as Cape Cod, she would slip into a rapture of ecstasy about nature. Drawing on this inspiration, she wrote the award-winning book *The Sea around Us* (1951), and then later, *A Sense of Wonder* (1965). Her love for nature also moved her to pen the classic warning about the dangers of pesticides, *Silent Spring* (1962), and several other remarkable books about nature.

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas was a wilderness advocate who linked his intense love for the outdoors to a moment in his youth. His father had died very unexpectedly, and as a teenager standing beside his father's grave in the high prairie of eastern Washington, Douglas felt a deep emptiness. He looked up at nearby snow-capped Mount Adams and suddenly realized that his second father would be the mountain (Douglas, 1962).

Roman Catholic priest and writer Thomas Berry often said his feelings about the spiritual power of nature were associated with "numinous experiences" exploring wild places in his childhood, especially one experience of finding a field filled with lilies when he was 11 (Revkin, 2009).

James Lovelock (1990), the renegade British scientist who conceived of the "Gaia Hypothesis" that the earth is alive, said that during the time he was working on his book about the living earth thesis, *Gaia: A New Look At Life* (1979), he would periodically hike to the summit of a nearby mountain, Brentor, where an old church, St. Michael de la Rupe, is located. After sitting in the church for a time, he would return home and find continued inspiration to formulate the Gaia Hypothesis.

A consistent pattern in the lives of many committed environmentalists then is having had one or more extraordinary life experiences in nature that seem to ignite a spark in the soul that kindles passionate love for nature. The experiences often take on a transpersonal quality that made them what Rhea



White (1994) called, “Exceptional Human Experiences.” She described them as “an umbrella term for many types of experiences generally considered to be psychic, mystical or encounter-type” (p. 138). Examples of Exceptional Human Experiences include transformative experiences, mystical or unitive experiences, psychic experiences, peak experiences, certain forms of non-ordinary consciousness, unusual death-related experiences, encounter experiences (synchronicities), and exceptional “normal” experiences, such as inspiration, empathy, exceptional performance, and vivid or lucid dreams.

Within the field of environmental education, there has been parallel research about special experiences in nature for three decades. That field’s term for them is “Significant Life Experiences,” first coined by Thomas Tanner (1980) to describe notable formative experiences that committed conservationists say have had a lasting influence on their lives.

#### SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES

A growing body of research in the field of environmental education, such as that of Louise Chawla (1998, 1999, 2006) and Thomas Tanner (1998), supports the thesis that profound Significant Life Experiences with nature are a key to developing love for nature, which is a taproot of becoming a lifelong conservationist. These researchers have surveyed many members of citizen environmental groups, asking them to describe what experiences have had the most effect on developing their love for nature, and consistently have found many more people than we think, who are environmentally concerned,. Most often Significant Life Experiences are moments of awe in nature that seem to ignite a love for nature, akin to what E.O. Wilson calls “biophilia” (Wilson, 1984) and Yu-Fu Tuan calls “Topophilia”(Tuan, 1974).

The research on Significant Life Experiences dovetails nicely with Abraham Maslow’s studies of “peak experiences,” and their role in self-actualization. Maslow found that as people grow older, they are increasingly likely to have experiences with transcendental qualities (Maslow, 1971) and, as noted earlier, he found that as people self-actualize they come to find nourishment and inspiration from nature.

That more has not been written and said about the critical importance of these experiences in forming attitudes about conservation is most likely due to skepticism and fears about transcendent and paranormal experiences being symptoms of mental illness (Tart, 1995).

Regardless what you call them – Significant Life Experiences, emotional bonding experiences, Exceptional Human Experiences, spiritual or religious experiences, peak experiences, etc.–there is considerable agreement that experiences with a transpersonal quality are important to health, happiness, creativity and love for nature that translates into conservation action. The question is, what factors cause such experiences.

It is well established that both the mental set of the person and the environmental setting have an influence on people experiencing altered states of consciousness (Tart, 1975). Clearly the mental set of the person is half the equation, but what about the influence of place? Can a place influence having Significant Life Experiences?

#### THE POWER OF PLACE

The transpersonal psychology literature is filled with research about transcendent experiences and altered states of consciousness associated with ingesting psychoactive substances, meditation, yoga, sports, ritual, and so forth (Grof, 1972; James, 1961; Murphy, 1993, and others) Surprisingly little research deals with the influence of the natural environment on transpersonal states, especially when no psychoactive chemicals or special rituals are involved. This is surprising considering that making pilgrimages to special sacred places is one of the oldest and most universal spiritual traditions.

East Indian scholar Lama Anagarika Govinda (1981) has observed:

Personality consists in the power to influence others, and this power is due to consistency, harmony and one-pointedness of character. If these qualities are present in an individual ... he is a fit leader for humanity, be he a ruler, a thinker or a saint. If these qualities are present in a mountain, we recognize it as a vessel of cosmic power and we call it a sacred mountain. (p.27)

All around the world there are special caves, valleys, mountains, groves, stones and springs that have been revered for thousands of years as being "sacred." Mircea Eliade (1959) referred to them as "hierophonies," for they share the common quality of helping people enter into altered states of awareness where spiritual states of consciousness, "krakophonies," are more accessible.

For over three decades I have been collecting stories of unusual experiences associated with people visiting special places (Swan, 1990, 1991). Some of the stories come from biographies of famous people; others are from people I have seen in therapy or who have told me their stories in person or via mail. A large source of reports comes from producing the first international conference on the "Gaia Hypothesis" at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and producing the five-year annual Spirit of Place Symposiums in the US and Japan, which drew over 10,000 people and featured over 350 speakers, including members of 20 different American Indian tribes, and Inuit, Ainu, Aborigine, and Polynesian groups (Swan & Swan, 1996). These programs afforded access to a significant number of people familiar with sacred places, a number of whom were willing to share their stories. In compiling this phenomenology I have not included experiences of people who were under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, since one could argue that the chemicals, and not the place, influenced their states of consciousness.

1. The experience usually begins with a feeling of being drawn to a place for no apparent reason. Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz observed: “It is being more and more firmly established that parapsychological phenomena occur mainly in the surroundings of an individual [in] whom the unconscious wants to take a step in the development of consciousness” (von Franz, 1974).
2. Once people arrive, they sense an “extra energy,” a shift in perceptual clarity and possibly see animals or unusual animal behavior.
3. A sight or sound often seems to trigger a new state of consciousness in which normal ego boundaries slip away. According to Marghanita Laski (1961), experiences of ecstasy take place “almost always associated with something valuable or beautiful or both”... (p. 266).
4. The person senses an energy coming to them, and bringing perceptual changes: time slows, the world takes on an exceptional clarity, and symbolic, mythic and metaphoric dimensions of life become more clear and present, as in lucid dreaming.
5. There is usually an experience of mental-emotional unity that cannot fully be put into words, which then may be followed by some type of unusual states of consciousness— visionary states of consciousness, outpouring of creativity, physical agility and grace, special rapport with animals, etc.
6. The entire experience seldom lasts over half an hour, although the energizing effects may last for hours or days.
7. One’s life is changed. They feel a deeper, richer sense of nature and a desire to protect it, as well as a heightened sense of self and personal destiny.
8. It is as if a door has opened, and a new dimension of reality, consciousness and possibility is present and needs to be explored and integrated into consciousness (Swan, 1990, 1991).

Nature is never fully predictable. Many of these experiences in nature seem similar to Carl Jung’s description of meaningful coincidences, or “synchronicities,” which cannot be planned but seem to arise from magical harmonies that may or not be planned or conscious (Jung, 1952; Main, 2007).

Of course, it is possible to use ceremonies and rituals to better harmonize one’s mind with a place. Teachers who conduct wilderness retreats with solos, such as John Milton (2006) and Thomas Pinkson (1997), report their students have many special experiences on their solos, but still just what does happen cannot be predicted.

Not all sacred places are alike. According to native wisdom all around the world, each place has its own special spirit or power. Native people in North America, Australia, Africa, Polynesia and East Asia have told me about places that are special because they are burial grounds and graves; purification sites; healing sites; special flora and fauna area; quarries yielding sacred stones; vision questing and dreaming sites; mythic and legendary sites; temples and shrines; spiritual renewal; astronomical observatories; birthing sites; and, places associated with historical events (Swan, 1984).

Just why certain places affect us in various ways and seem to move us toward particular kinds of experiences remains undetermined. Native people speak of spirits or in Japan, “Kami.”

Science is just beginning to explore the power of place. It is known that at some sacred places there are unusual natural electromagnetic fields that entrain our minds. Others may be associated with artesian springs. Still others have an abundance of negative air ion and even mind-altering gases. Some springs have unusual water chemistry (Swan, 1990). Recently researchers studying Delphi, in Greece, found that unusual gases with mind-altering properties seep from fissures in the rocks where the Oracle prophesied (Roach, 2001). Devereux (2000) is one of the few researchers to explore the origins of sacred sites and compare these data with modern science.

There also is the concept of the “Predecessor Factor,” which in Chinese Feng Shui geomancy means that each place has a memory of what took place there before. (Rossbach, 2002). This seems similar to Sheldrake’s concept of “morphic fields” (Sheldrake, 2009).

A foremost religious historian of the twentieth century, Mircea Eliade had no doubt about the existence of sacred places and their powers, regardless if science can explain their power or not. He wrote:

The rocks, springs, caves and woods venerated from the earliest historic times are still, in different forms, held as sacred by Christian communities today. A superficial observer might well see this aspect of popular piety as a ‘superstition,’ and see in it proof that all community religious life is largely made up of things inherited from prehistoric times. But what the continuity of the sacred places in fact indicates is the autonomy of hierophonies; the sacred expresses itself according to laws of its own dialectic and this expression comes to man *from without*. If the choice of his sacred places were left to man himself, then there could be no explanation for this continuity (Eliade, 1959, as cited in Beane & Doty, 1975, p. 154).

In many cases, people consider sacred places as churches, shrines and temples. When I visited sacred places in Japan, “sei-chi,” which are numerous and well-marked by temples and shrines, both Buddhist and Shinto priests told me that the place was there first, and man’s artifacts were erected to honor the spirit of that place and facilitate honoring it. Perhaps one reason why sacred places have not received more attention in North America is that American Indians are often reluctant to share information about their sacred places for fear people will desecrate or abuse them and, temples, shrines or other monuments do not mark most American Indian sacred sites.

#### VARIETY OF TRANSPERSONAL EXPERIENCES ASSOCIATED WITH SACRED PLACES

An accounting of the variety of these transpersonal experiences encountered in nature, while in the vicinity of a sacred place, is described in the following list.

Each experience is always fresh and new, and often an incident may include more than one type of experience. This is a beginning list. Hopefully this article will encourage others to study this subject and build upon this list.

### *1. Unitive Bonding with Nature and Special Places*

When actor Robert Redford was ten years old, recovering from a mild case of polio, his mother took him to Yosemite National Park. Redford was swept up in the splendor of the valley. "I said to myself, 'That's it – I want to be a part of that.' I started right then. I spent more time outdoors. I started to hike. I went to Yosemite to work, and I learned to climb there" (Redford, 1989, as cited in Foster, 1989, p. A-9).

William Stapp, former director of environmental education for UNESCO, traces his initial realization of his lifelong dedication to work in support of ecological conservation to an experience he had in a tide pool as a freshman in college. While he had been to the ocean before, he had never spent time studying the organisms that live in tidal pools. On this day, as he waded out into the surf and looked closely, a sense of wonder was awakened in him as he looked on the myriad of creatures clustered together in a tidal pool. He became engrossed in his study, and in a moment of realization, he saw that everything is connected to everything else in one great golden chain of life. The rapture of this unitive ecstasy was so great that he forgot where he was, and nearly drowned in the incoming tide. Years later, after serving as the first Director of Environmental Education for UNESCO, Stapp created the Global Rivers Environmental Education Network, which has trained thousands of youngsters all around the world to monitor water quality (Stapp, 1996).

### *2. Feelings of Bliss, Wonder and Awe*

Eco-poet Gary Snyder writes about his childhood in Washington State, growing up in the "ghost of an old growth forest." "When I was young, I had an immediate, deep sympathy with the natural world ... an indefinable awe," which led to "an attitude of gratitude, wonder and a sense of protection, especially as I began to see the hills being bulldozed for roads, and the forests of the Pacific Northwest magically float away on logging trucks" (1977, p.56).

Carl Jung reported that while standing on Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, looking across the plains teeming with wildlife, he had a reverie where he saw himself as part of the ongoing pageant of life, a link in the continuing evolutionary chain connecting past, present and future. This perception forever gave his life a sense of perspective, showing him his place in history (Jung, 1964).

### *3. Waking Visions*

In the American Indian tradition, a common coming of age ceremony is to go out alone into a wild place and fast and pray, hoping to have a vision that

reveals one's destiny and power objects and allies. Many modern vision quest workshops are patterned after this ceremony.

In *The Bible* (Luke 4:5) Jesus is described as climbing a high mountain, led by the devil. Reaching the summit "in a moment of time," he was shown all the kingdoms of the world. In a similar fashion Mohammed had visions and heard voices on Mount Arafat, and Moses and Elijah spoke with God on Horeb.

In the spring of 1652 George Fox climbed atop Pendle Hill in Lancashire, England, and received a vision of a "great people to be gathered." The result was the formation of the Quaker church. In a similar experience in New York State in 1830, Joseph Smith had a vision while exploring an Indian mound. This led him to found the Mormon religion.

Gifford Pinchot's adamic ecstasy in Rock Creek Park that gave birth to conservation is another example of a waking vision that started a movement.

#### *4. Interspecies Communication and Cooperation*

Shark and Turtle Rock in the village of Vaitongi is the most famous sacred place on the main island of Tutuila in American Samoa. When in American Samoa, I was taken to this site by a *Matai*, or chief, Ma'a Eleasora. We were silent for a moment, honoring the spirit of the place. Then he said a prayer and we made a small offering of food into the ocean. Ma'a then told me the legend of this stone. It is said that in an early time, there was a great hurricane, which destroyed crops and made the sea too rough to fish. People were starving, and so two women decided that they would sacrifice themselves so their food would go to the children. The women went to this rock and performed a ceremony. Then they wrote on this stone what they were doing and instructed the children that if they wanted to thank them, they should come to this spot and show their respect with prayers and song. If they were sincere in heart, a shark and a turtle would rise up out of the ocean and swim in a circle for a few minutes. No sooner had Ma'a finished his story than a giant whale breached just off shore.

A female client that I saw in counseling reported how she had felt depressed for some time and went for a drive. She said she felt guided to a deserted forest campground. She got out of her car, and almost immediately was greeted by a blue jay that landed on a nearby picnic table and began crying loudly. The bird hopped down off the table and continued calling, as if inviting her to follow it. She followed the bird, which hopped along a trail. Soon they rounded a bend and she found herself looking at a spellbinding view of Mount Hood. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she felt a profound wave of bliss and joy flow through her, washing away her depression. In a few minutes the ecstasy passed. The jay hopped down out of a tree and led her back to her car. She got in and drove away, feeling that the mountain had made her realize her need to develop a spiritual path.

Hubert, the oldest son of the Belgian Duke of Acquataine, abandoned a life of nobility when on a hunt in the Ardennes Forest in the late 600's he came upon

a stag, over the head of which was the figure of Christ, who said to him: "Hubert, unless thou turnest to the Lord, and leadest an holy life, thou shalt quickly go down into hell." Hubert dismounted, prostrated himself and said, "Lord, what wouldst Thou have me do?" He received the answer, "Go and seek Lambert, and he will instruct you." Like St. Francis, Hubert gave up his material possessions and became a priest, preaching to those in the Ardennes Forest. Later Hubert became the Bishop of Liege in Belgium and ultimately, St. Hubert, the patron saint of hunters, mathematicians, opticians and metalworkers (Knight, 2009).

### 5. *Vivid Dreaming*

Carl Jung believed that people visiting certain places tend to have dreams that contain similar symbols and mythic themes. He called this "psychic localization," which is very similar to the concept of the spirit of place (Jung, 1964). One example: many people visiting Indian Hot Springs in West Texas report having vivid dreams of tall, nearly naked Indians and bands of wild horses (Littledog, 1994).

In Australia aborigines go on "dream treks," during which time they walk long distance cross country, performing rituals and spending the nights at special "dreaming caves." The idea of caves that facilitate dreaming is shared with other many cultures. In the hills above Santa Barbara, California, one may visit, as I have, an ancient dreaming cave of the Chumash Indians, where the record of their dreams is preserved in spectacular pictographs (Victor Sky Eagle, personal communication, August 14, 1981).

A colleague, an anthropologist with whom I had worked, told me that she went on a pilgrimage to the sacred places of India. One day she journeyed to a region where the rainforest had been clear-cut on a sacred mountain. Camping in that area, that night she had a dream about the trees crying. That dream moved her to develop a whole new teaching program of classes on spiritual ecology. (Personal communication, 1988)

When Devereux, Krippner, Tartz, and Fish (2006) studied dreaming at sacred sites in England using a group of subjects and waking them up when they exhibited REM eye movement, their results about unique dreaming varied considerably. Some reported unusual dream effects; others did not. This sounds like the same problem with studying Jung's "synchronicities;" they occur without prior knowledge. Another study by three of researchers, Krippner, Devereux and Fish (2003) explored how modern psychological measures of dreams could be applied to research on dreaming and place.

The study of the relationship between dreams and place as one measure of "psychic localization" is an area that deserves considerable study. In the art of native people we see certain shapes, forms and colors that are very distinctive for a region, such as the art of Pacific Northwest Coast Indians. To what extent such art is influenced by place, versus culture, remains unclear. If one could

show that place, especially beautiful places in nature, wildlife, etc., stimulates the creative process that forms symbols, it would lend support to the need for wilderness preservation as a stimulus for the human soul.

#### *6. Hearing Unusual Sounds and Smelling Unusual Odors*

On a trip to Hawaii, I was taken to places where, according to Kahunas like Sam Lono and Morrnah Simeona, people had experienced unusual sounds and odors. For example, hiking on Mount Shasta, a writer heard strange tinkling noises. A friend told her that these were the bells of the spirits of the mountain, and that others visiting the mountain report similar clairaudience. That night she had a vivid dream showing the fiery volcanic bowels of the mountain. She awoke and wrote pages of flowing poetry and later started an organization to prevent development on the mountain.

A couple attending the Spirit of Place symposium I conducted in San Francisco during 1989 reported that while on holiday visiting the island of Iona, off the coast of Scotland, they smelled flowers in the air where none could be seen. They later found out that such flowers were used in certain old religious ceremonies that used to be conducted on this island. Visitors to Hawaii who walk on or beside *heiau*, ancient ceremonial platforms, report sometimes hearing people singing and chanting.

#### *7. Ancestral-Memory Recollections*

Visiting the ruins on Mount Olympus, the well-known sensitive Anne Armstrong felt intense sexual feelings pulsating in her body. She later found that she had been in an area where Dionysian rites had once been held (A. Armstrong, personal communication, August, 10, 1988).

Visiting Chaco Canyon, author Eleanor Gadon tried and tried to understand the petroglyphs she saw on the canyon walls, but could find no one to help her. That night in a dream an Indian woman came to her and told her what they meant (E. Gadon, personal communication, August 16, 1989).

Walking the trails of his ancestors on Bodega Head along the Pacific Ocean, Kashia Pomo shaman Lorin Smith heard “voices” from his ancestors calling to him. Soon, through dreams, he received instructions on how to build a ceremonial round house, which he has since built. No one alive knew how to build such a roundhouse (L. Smith, personal communication, August 17, 1989).

#### *8. Fusion with Elements of Nature*

A graduate student in one of my classes at the California Institute of Integral Studies said that he dreamed he saw himself in a stone at Yosemite National Park. When he recognized his face there, the stone dissolved, and turned into



several other animals. He woke up laughing, exclaiming “everything is so beautiful.” A few weeks later he was inspired to design an ambitious graduate thesis project of trekking the hills of Nepal to determine the feasibility of using solar ovens to replace wood stoves, which would reduce deforestation. Six months later he was in Nepal, where he carried out the project, something he felt he never could have done without the inspiration of his dream (Personal communication, 1989).

Visiting an old-growth forest in northern California, a woman who attended a workshop that I led at the 1989 Spirit of Place Symposium reported feeling being “drawn up into a tree.” She stood still, and for the next few moments she felt as if her body was the same as the trees’. She has since become an outspoken advocate for preserving old-growth forests.

#### EMPOWERMENT BY A PLACE

If you go to a special place and have a transcendent experience, what does it do for you, aside from a momentary experience of bliss and wonder?

The first value is that it may change your view of yourself, the universe, and nature. According to Mircea Eliade, following a spiritual experience at a special place, all of nature becomes a “cosmic sacrality” (Eliade, 1959). Maslow felt that such experiences awakened us to the “Being-Values” of life that come with self-actualization (Maslow, 1971). One evening over dinner after a workshop I had produced for him, Joseph Campbell shared that his most favorite special places were Delphi, Lascaux and Palenque, but he did not know just why, except that he said that “I Joe Campbell feel damn well more powerful there” (Swan, 1990, pp. 107–108).

The second value is that you may glimpse possibilities of the future, as well as a better understanding of the past and the present. Among many cultures, people go to special places to conduct rituals in hopes of seeking their destiny and gaining glimpses of future possibilities.

The third value is that you discover special alignments of power and creative inspiration that energize and order your life. Landscape architect Lawrence Halprin told me that he found inspiration by going to special places and sketching them. He found that as his sketch became more and more like the look and feel of the place, he felt empowered by it, and he took that with him into his award-winning designs (Swan, 1991, pp. 305–314).

A fourth value is that during moments of magic in nature you may be blessed by receiving guidance or creative inspiration. Visiting the Iglulik Eskimos in the 1920’s, Danish Explorer Knud Rasmussen was told by an old Eskimo shaman named Najagnea: “The best magic words come to one when one is alone out among the mountains. These are always the most powerful in their effects. The power of solitude is great beyond understanding” (Ostermann, 1952, p. 99).

A fifth value is that many people who have transpersonal experiences in nature find themselves drawn to become ardent conservationists. This is important to unification of efforts to inspire people to be conservation-minded.

#### DISCUSSION

In the last few years, ever-increasing media attention to being “green” and a wide variety of ecological problems has steadily risen. Nonetheless, a 2009 Pew Foundation study found that of 20 social issues people were asked to rate in both January 2008 and January 2009, five have slipped significantly in importance. “Protecting The Environment” fell the most precipitously. Forty-one percent rated this as a top priority, down from 56% a year ago. Global warming, which has had such a strong media campaign, came in dead last in people’s priorities (Pew Research Center, 2009).

People are very aware of ecology today, but better strategies are needed for getting them outdoors, and helping them bond with nature. This is where psychologists can be of great help, but there is all too often a division between environmental education and psychology. What is needed to bring together these two fields is a common rallying concept that all proponents of various theories and movements will accept that will enable them to work together. Aldo Leopold’s “ecological conscience,” I believe, is such a unifying concept, and transpersonal psychology is equipped to provide momentum.

According to his biographer, Curt Meine (1988), wildlife biologist Aldo Leopold was extremely well-read in religion, philosophy and psychology. Sitting at a hand-hewn pine table beside a field stone fireplace in a converted chicken coop cabin along the banks of the Wisconsin River in Baraboo, Wisconsin, that was called by the Leopold family, “the shack,” in the mid 1940’s Leopold synthesized his thoughts in *A Sand County Almanac* as he wrote:

Conservation is a state of harmony between men and the land. Despite nearly a century of propaganda, conservation still proceeds at a snail’s pace. The usual answer to this dilemma is ‘more conservation education.’ No one will debate this, but is it certain that only the *volume* of education needs stepping up? (Leopold, 1949, pp. 222–223)

“That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved is an extension of ethics.” The sympathetic, ethical connection between the land and the mind Leopold called an “Ecological Conscience” (pp. 222–241). Leopold said that the guiding force of the ecological conscience is a “Land Ethic” – knowing that “... a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong otherwise” (p. 240).

When *A Sand County Almanac* came out in 1949, a year following Leopold’s death, it did not sell well. When re-issued in the 1960’s, the book skyrocketed

to best-seller lists. It has now sold over two million copies and is translated into nearly 30 languages. For many environmentalists, this is “The Bible.”

Leopold understood that a “conscience” is a system of perceiving and interpreting the world that bubbles up from deep roots in the unconscious; an artesian spring of consciousness that permeates many areas of thought and action, serving as an intuitive guide to knowing what is right and what is not that becomes a paradigm for judgment. Many people who report having had transpersonal experiences in nature say they have stronger feelings about conservation. Sacred places, and the experiences they inspire, seem to be associated with generating feelings and perceptions that are good for both man and nature – “The Ecological Conscience.”

Today the average person lives in an urbanized area and spends over 95% of his or her life indoors, at least eight hours of which watching an electronic screen – TV, computer, iPod, cell phones, Blackberries, etc. The screens of our lives have taken the place of our organs of perception. We have become a new screen-addicted species, *Homo sapiens indoorensis*, as the film “Wall-E” (2008) so beautifully conveys.

News media vie for attention by trying to broadcast the most dramatic issues of the day. Most of the major environmental organizations follow suit, pumping out a continual stream of news of fresh disasters to their members and the public at large. These warning messages cry out for attention, seeking to mobilize action and also solicit contributions. Sadly, we are at a place where, without disasters, many organizations would wane or disappear. Tragically, when fresh disasters cannot be found, sometimes groups resort to manufacturing them for the camera (Platt, 1998).

The Achilles Heel of the environmental movement is the need to use fear to continually motivate people. It has been established for decades that when you subject people to fear-filled messages, in time they turn off, especially when they can do little about it, except send money (Swan, 2000). Barry Glassner has eloquently described how modern sensationalistic journalism leads many people to live in a “culture of fear” that numbs people’s feelings, and may even drive them more into escapism (Glassner, 2000). This seems one major reason that explains the Pew poll, although surely the economy is another. In a similar vein, a new psychiatric syndrome, “Climate Change Delusion,” is one consequence of flooding people with negative, fear-laden messages (Bolt, 2008).

Perhaps even worse, a recent poll of children finds that 1/3 feel that they worry that, in the future, the state of the environment will be decidedly worse than it is now (Chua, 2009).

Richard Louv’s popular book *The Last Child in the Woods* (2005) has certainly made many people aware of the potential negative effect on children from spending most of their lives indoors, and using screens to stay informed, rather than their senses. In response, programs such as The Children and Nature

Network (<http://www.childrenandnature.org/>) have been created to help aid connecting children with nature.

Simple contact with nature is beneficial. A recent survey of 1413 Norwegian adults finds that not only do people report feeling better as a result of exposure to nature, but they also report that they are more prone to take action on behalf of the environment. (Hartig, Kaiser, & Strumse, 2007). However, there is more to nature kinship than simply getting outdoors. We know precious little about perception of the natural world and its effects on consciousness, and proper methods to help people develop an ecological conscience are badly needed for educators, as well as to help people in general. One problem here is that while modern education is very focused on rational, intellectual consciousness other cultures that have developed a keen sense of place cultivate other senses. Chinese Feng Shui geomancers, for example, assert that we have over 100 senses by which to perceive the world around us (Rossbach, 2002). Research on Gardner's (1999) concept of the "naturalistic intelligence," as one aspect of intelligence associated with perception of and appreciation for nature, may hold important clues on how to best build an ecological conscience through cultivating affinity with the natural world.

Ideally, interdisciplinary teams of psychologists working in cooperation with ecologists, environmental managers and environmental educators are called for to do research and develop strategies to maximize the value of contact with nature. In such cross-disciplinary efforts, we may find that bias against transpersonal and paranormal experiences weakens when one realizes that ancient wisdom and modern science can agree on the existence and validity of transpersonal experiences in natural settings as being a cornerstone of an ecological conscience, and such experiences are considered normal in traditional, non-western cultures that do live in greater harmony with nature (Swan, 1986). For example, it would seem that journeying to sacred places, at least for some people, facilitates making possible breakthroughs in consciousness. If one cannot do it in person, then mental imagery journeys to places also can be valuable as an educational method to help people bond with nature and appreciate the power or spirit of a place (Swan, 1983).

Nature is lived with, not controlled. That is why we speak of "living in harmony with nature." Perhaps finding a point of common agreement like Leopold's "Ecological Conscience" can unite psychology and ecology to aid developing effective strategies to help people live in harmony with nature. In Maslow's writings we find something very similar to Leopold's ecological conscience, when Maslow (1971) writes:

"Not only is man PART of nature, and it part of him, but also he must be at least minimally isomorphic with nature in order to be viable in it. It has evolved with him. His communion with what transcends him therefore need not be defined as non-natural or supernatural. It may be seen as 'biological experience'" (p. 322).

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PDF | On Jan 1, 2001, Fred H. Besthorn and others published Transpersonal Psychology and Deep Ecological Philosophy.Â This article broadens and clarifies the way social work conceptualizes its ecological/system constructs and the professional commitments that flow from them. It utilizes important insight from a contemporary, radical environmental philosophy-ecofeminism-to search for language and descriptions that may help the profession begin the process of formulating and depicting an expanded ecological model of practice. This article sketches the essential philosophical premises of a revised ecological model and offers suggestions for interpreting and applying this model.