

# Gifts for Broken Places: Attending the Earth/Healing the Psyche

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When a great tract of wilderness, a neighborhood park, or even a favorite backyard tree is damaged or destroyed, we grieve, not only for ourselves but because we relate to nature's many forms as living presences whose lost vitality and beauty we sorely miss. The ecopsychology of the future must broaden its perspective to confront and heal that grief by actively tending to wounded places in ways that are accessible, personal, creative, meaningful and even fun.

Ecopsychologists have helped people to confront feelings of sadness, fear, and anger about the loss of places that are important to them and to recognize those responses as valid, rather than as projections of feelings that should be rightly aimed at a parent, spouse, or boss. The field of ecopsychology has broken down walls that once limited the psyche's challenges to human influences and has opened both the focus and the setting of therapy to oceans and parks, creeks explored in childhood, and wetlands currently being plowed up for a mall. Yet how can we be truly healthy humans or build sustainable, resilient communities of people who can cope with ecological stress if we continue to treat the natural world merely as a mirror of the human psyche while ignoring the living reality of places, including damaged places, themselves?

The nonprofit organization Radical Joy for Hard Times has developed a process of simple actions, called the Earth Exchange, that can be explored by a therapist with clients, among friends, in the company of a group, or even alone. These actions, summarized below, enable us to get reacquainted with a damaged place and begin the process of healing our relationship with it through simple acts of attention and gift-giving.

*Visiting a damaged place.* The prospect of actually going to a damaged, or "wounded" place can be daunting. We may fear that

visiting a clear-cut forest or a beach soaked in spilled oil will only aggravate feelings of distress about what has happened there. However, taking this step usually has just the opposite effect. Although the first few moments of being there can ignite intense feelings of sorrow, fear, and anger, those reactions usually give way as details of the place emerge and present themselves to our attention. With a facilitative attitude of openness and curiosity, both toward the place and toward our own responses to it, we discover that we are capable of confronting what we had imagined would be unconfrontable. We realize that, although the place is not what it was or what we might wish it could be again, it exists still, and we are irrefutably linked to it.

*Conceptualizing the experience as a dialogue between person and place.* When we sit or walk quietly in a place, open to what it might reveal and equally open to our own responses, the place takes on a new reality in our consciousness. No longer just a background that we move through to get somewhere else, it becomes a presence unto itself. Our awareness shifts back and forth between what arises in the environment and what arises within, and a "dialogue" between person and place unfolds. This exchange deepens when we take simple actions that express and elaborate on personal responses. As part of a small group visiting the site of an extensive forest fire in Virginia, Margaret came upon a burned sapling. Gazing at the charred bark and skeletal branches, she grieved that the tree had never had the chance to grow to maturity. She then felt a sharp ache for her sister, who was currently undergoing a burning herself as she received radiation treatments for breast cancer. Margaret's sorrow about the violence to the tree merged with that for her sister's suffering, and she wept for both. She sat by the tree, put her arms around it, and sang it a lullaby.

*Linking self and place through ceremony.* A ceremony is a symbolic action that clarifies and concretizes a real-world intention. Because being in a wounded place often evokes memories and feelings about personal wounds, creating simple ceremonies claims the reality of the suffering, frames it in a context, and enacts a meaningful resolution.

In the midst of a time of great personal and professional turmoil, including a recent suicide attempt by his teenage daughter, Thomas made a visit to a place that was also in turmoil, a forest in central Colorado that had been ravaged by the pine bark beetle and further damaged in a massive forest fire. He was surprised to see that wildflowers grew abundantly, however, and he gathered a bouquet as he walked. Reflecting on the metaphor of growth and beauty arising from waste, he felt the tenacity of life in the land and in his own body. He lay the flowers on a tree that had been devoured by beetles and then burned, expressing as he did so gratitude for the cycle of life and death. Then he hiked down to the river, where he took a purifying shower under a waterfall. The experience, he said later,

was simple and heartfelt. To fully accept and create beauty in a devastated forest helped me accept all that is in my life and in my family. It may not always feel great or look pretty, yet I can still create beauty.

*Sharing the experience.* We become more grounded in our experiences when we articulate them to others; this is the basis of “talk therapy.” During or after a visit to a wounded place, there are opportunities to share stories of our experiences there. Upon first arriving, we may speak of our relationship to the place, both before and after it was damaged. Later, we can share what happened during our “dialogue” with it.

*Making a gift for the place.* Those who recognize the impact of nature on the psyche often speak of gratitude to nature in general or to a specific place. But how often do we actually express that gratitude through our actions? The process of creating a gift for a place affirms our ongoing connection with it while transforming us from helpless victims to empowered change-makers. One way to create such a gift is to make art of materials provided by the place itself: leaves, broken branches, rubble, trash. The gift might be an altar fashioned on a tree stump, a dolphin constructed of plastic beach litter, or adornments for a dead tree. Using found materials to make the gift subtly affirms that all the elements required for transformation are inherently a part of the one for whom or which we desire that change. Making and offering the gift, not just in, but *for* the place, we awaken feelings of gratitude, compassion, empowerment, connectedness, and even joy.

*Expression of wishes or prayers.* The visit to the wounded place may conclude with the expression of wishes, prayers, or intentions for our

own future and/or that of the place: wishes for healing for a family or for reforestation, a commitment to write a poem about the experience or to join a local group dedicated to protecting it. Through this process we affirm that the experience we have undergone has ripples that will, if we participate in the process, continue to manifest in the days and months to come.

Attending to wounded places expands the benefits of ecopsychology to the communities and natural places that are vital to us. Confronting a wounded place, we recognize our own woundedness as part of a larger context, even as we take the wounds of nature and our communities more personally. Among the benefits of the process are

- access to feelings associated with “the wound,” as evinced in the place and mirrored in the individual
- relief at confronting what we had previously wished to avoid
- compassion for the Earth, its people, and creatures
- empowerment that comes through the making and offering of a gift

Engaging with and making gifts for wounded places, unlike mainstream environmental work, is not intended to restore or repair the natural world—although that may happen. Unlike traditional psychotherapy, it is not devoted strictly to healing the individual psyche—although that is likely to happen. Rather, the aim is to heal the *relationship* between people and nature, for until that bond is revitalized and given new meaning, neither nature nor humans will thrive.

### Author Disclosure Statement

The author of this article, Trebbe Johnson, is the founder and director of Radical Joy for Hard Times, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to support communities in finding and making beauty in wounded places.

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