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## Ecological Trauma and Common Addiction

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## ECOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND COMMON ADDICTION

### INTRODUCTION

Addiction may appear as a psycho-somatic response to trauma. Some children are born today with purely somatic inherited addictions – fetal-alcohol syndrome, for example – but the original addiction of the parent likely arose as a psychological response to trauma, and commonly, studies link addiction to trauma.<sup>1</sup> In, *In the realm of hungry ghosts: Close encounters with addiction*, Gabor Maté concludes that “A hurt is at the center of all addictive behaviors ... in the gambler, the Internet addict, the compulsive shopper and the workaholic.” (2009). In this paper, I will discuss a specific vector for trauma, Ecological trauma, and its relationship to widespread addictive behavior.

I define ecological trauma as the experience of witnessing – consciously or not – the pervasive abuse and destruction of the natural world, of which we are a part, and for which we have a primal affinity. A person today, whose senses remain alive, may experience trauma when witnessing the exploitation of nature. Almost everyone in the modern, industrial world can tell stories of treasured childhood experiences in natural settings or wilderness sanctuaries that have been obliterated for a shopping mall, parking lot, highway, or other industrial, consumer function.

For most of the world, for billions of workers, indigenous communities, and poor, ecological trauma persists as a feature of daily life. “The poor are not those who have been ‘left behind’ [by industrialism],” Vandana Shiva, Indian physicist and ecologist, points out, “they are the ones who have been robbed.” (2005). The wealth accumulated in Europe and North America has been plun-

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<sup>1</sup> Worth reading are the reports on trauma, addiction and recovery conducted in joint researches by Joseph Volpicelli, Geetha Balaraman, Julie Hahn, Heather Wallace, and Donald Bux (1999); Dusty Miller, Laurie Guidry (2001); as well as, more recently, Martin Driessen, Silke Schulte, Christel Luedecke, Ingo Schäfer, Frauke Sutmann, Martin Ohlmeier, Ulrich Kemper, Gertrud Koesters, Claudia Chodzinski, Udo Schneider, Thomas Broese, Christian Dette, Ulla Havemann-Reinicke (2008).

dered from the natural world, from the oceans, forests, and mines, leaving behind depleted landscapes and traumatized communities. The process of recovery from this trauma may help protect and restore the lost wildness in our world and in ourselves.

### CLIMATE CRISIS AS SYMPTOM

In 1991 the nations of the world held the first climate conference in Berlin (later “COP” or Conference of the Parties). The world’s meteorologists and atmospheric chemists had correctly correlated observable global warming with human carbon emissions, and this first conference set the goal of returning worldwide carbon emissions to the 1990 level.

Carbon in the atmosphere is measured in “parts-per-million” (ppm), and in 1991, humans were increasing atmospheric carbon at the rate of about 0.5 ppm each year. Today, in 2017, after 26 years of climate conferences, the global community is increasing atmospheric carbon at the rate of about 3.6 ppm per year, seven-times faster than at the time of the first climate meeting.

This little story of geopolitical incompetence is comparable to an alcoholic battling a bottle-per-day habit: The alcoholic begins therapy to “cure” the addiction. After 26 years of therapy, the patient is drinking seven bottles of alcohol per day, and still promising to “get better.” The extensive team of therapists feel optimistic: “We’re making improvements.”

As absurd as this sounds, this precisely represents the state of the world’s climate “progress.” Industrial nations appear addicted to carbon fuels (coal, oil, gas), continually promise to change, pledge to reduce oil consumption, hold meetings to discuss it, while continually increasing consumption. By all measure, this pattern appears as pathological addiction.

Like the victim, who remains in cohabitation with an abusive spouse, the global community appears caught in a double bind as described by Gregory Bateson and his colleagues (Don D. Jackson, Jay Haky, and John Weakland at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Palo Alto, (1956) sixty years ago. For the abuse victim, the double bind may be: (1) stay and suffer abuse, or (2) leave and face poverty and loneliness, possibly separation from one’s children, or simply fear of the unknown. For society, the double bind may appear as: (1) keep consuming and burn the Earth, or (2) slow consumption and face hunger, poverty, or fear of the unknown.

We may also recognize – as Catherine Bateson recalls in the film of Nora Bateson, (2011). *An ecology of mind: A daughter's portrait of Gregory Bateson*. that “the pathology is in the system.” When treating addiction or other social dysfunction, one may find that the pathology does not rest in the disruptive child, in the self-harming teen, or in the addicted adult, but rather pervades the entire family system, and thereby the entire social system in which the family lives, embedded. The child acting out at school may be the systemic alarm, not the source of dysfunction. Likewise, the rise of a vocal environmental movement over the last half-century, even apparent anti-social activism, arises as a response to a pervasive social pathology.

Indeed, as a global community, we appear as a dysfunctional family. Public discourse digresses into rant and manipulation. The strong abuse the weak, and alleged leaders behave like addicts, unwilling to change the destructive habits that degrade others and our home, the Earth itself. As commonly witnessed in abusive relationships, the powerful proclaim a taboo against protest and vilify those who cry out, labeling them as the crazy ones. And thus, a third link in the chain of abuse that begins with a double bind, and which correlates to acute mental breakdown and schizophrenia: The taboo against speaking about the trauma, in conformity with the positions of Sandra Butler (1978), Michel Foucault (1978 [1976]), Eviatar Zerubavel (2007). We witness this today in the vilification of environmentalists as alleged “terrorists” or anti-capitalist “subversives,” or as “pessimists,” who refuse to believe in the promise of technology and wealth to solve our problems.

Ten million people in our human family starve to death every year. Children serve as slaves and wither in factories, making trinkets for the rich. Women are kidnapped and distributed around the world like common cargo in shipping containers. Indigenous people are driven from their land. On top of these horrific injustices, we daily devastate the only source of real wealth: Earth itself. Every day, we lose fertile soil, discharge CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere, scatter toxins, level forests, turn grasslands into desert, and create islands of plastic garbage in the sea.

Our governments and captains of industry shrug off the signs of dysfunction, and promise to “change,” to become “more sustainable,” like the alcoholic parent who promises to reform, but never does. Marketers dress up business-as-usual in a “green” guise – printing pictures of the Earth on plastic containers of detergent – to ease our worries. The sanctioned voices of the status quo assure us that all is well. We may make every effort to enjoy the blessings

of this life and bring comfort and hope to others, but we cannot wish away the darkness. As rivers die and species vanish, some in our global family watch in horror, some remain unaware, and others defend themselves with denial.

The loss of comfort and protection within a healthy ecosystem appears in modern human psychology as stress, trauma, and addiction. Individuals may feel an emptiness that they cannot name, a paucity that they cannot describe, a mysterious loneliness. Addictions tend to appear as attempts – conscious or unconscious – to fill this emptiness, this craving for something in our animal nature that remains unfulfilled, unsatisfied.

### ECOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Some, who experience such trauma as they witness the loss of wildness, cry out and try to fix the dysfunction. Others may suffer the trauma unconsciously, may not know what is missing in their life, may work in an industrial, corporate environment for 50 weeks each year, and then flee for a two week holiday, into nature, where they can feel alive again. Wilderness was our first teacher and first healer. We go back to her naturally and feel something deeply missing.

Modern neuroses and addictions, prevalent in industrial nations, can be traced, at least partially, to the trauma of separation from natural security and the trauma of witnessing the abuse of nature. The marvels and conveniences of technological society provide only a thin veneer over our natural being. We remain biophysical animals akin to ants and raccoons. Millennia ago, our primate ancestors overwhelmed all other species by controlling fire and developing tools, winning hegemony over the Earth, but in our fundamental instincts, desires, and reactions, we reflect a long evolution in the lap of nature.

Regardless of prevailing conceits, we retain patterns learned from 50 million years of primate evolution, 5 million years of hominid development in productive ecological habitats, and 500,000 years of fire-bearing, tool-making hunter-gatherer culture. During this long genesis, humanity grew within the comfort and constraints of an intact ecosystem that supplied sustenance, vital lessons, wonder, and a home. Watching that home fall under the blade of industrialism shocks our system, whether we know it or not.

Although modest and physically challenging, primal life offered certain benefits and shaped our nature. Early humans, like all animals, matured in stable communities with relatively secure food supplies. For millennia, fami-

lies remained intact and children grew up watching parents work, surrounded by what naturalist David Abram calls the “more than human world” – the ultimate parent – learning lessons from the wild world, from creatures, and from landscapes (1997).

These ecosystem comforts nourished us for 99.99 percent of our ancestral development. Then, only a few thousand years ago, some humans began living in urban environments, relying on remote agriculture, specialist skills, and the wiles of moneychangers. Within the last few hundred years, industrial culture has widened this separation from nature, divided families, and destroyed communities, creating alienated individuals clinging to scarce jobs and rewarded with packaged food and entertainment, like the “bread and circuses” that Roman emperors bestowed upon disenfranchised peasants.

In spite of our civilized ways, human psychology remains linked to our primal origins. We suffer the trauma of witnessing ecological abuse, watching our comforting wild home being destroyed, our relatives – owls, tigers, gorillas – eradicated, and Earth diminished.

### THE CAPACITY TO FEEL

“We live in an insane culture,” writes Kathy McMahon (2017, March), a clinical psychologist, who posts stories of environmental trauma on her Peak Oil Blues website. “Rather than marginalize the cries for reform, we need to normalize the pain. Protest and concern are healthy reactions to loss and grief.” McMahon believes we study the wrong people, those traumatized by war, violence, and environmental destruction. “We should study those who *aren’t* suffering these symptoms, the so-called “normals,” who haven’t allowed these horrible experiences to impact their daily lives. What sort of individual feels none of these things? Those who can’t or don’t feel the loss or who don’t know why they are drinking and drugging themselves, that is the true tragedy.”

Psychologist Chellis Glendinning – in her two books, *My name is Chellis and I’m in recovery from western civilization* (1994) and *Off the map: an expedition deep into empire and the global economy*, – describes an “original trauma” from the failure of technology and globalization to provide the essential comforts that nature and community once supplied. This loss, she explains, leads to addictive behavior as people fill the void with consumption, drugs, and fashions. She describes a “desperate coping” manifested as addiction, anger, numbness, and attempts to appear “normal” by the standards of an insane culture.

A quarter century ago, ecological pioneer Paul Shepard examined natural alienation in *The tender carnivore and the sacred game* (1973) and later in *Nature and madness* (1992), and other writings. Shepard proposed that a deficient development of modern citizens has led ecological destruction. Ancestral humans, he believed, acquired a healthy reciprocity with nature because young children experienced a mother always present, fathers with comprehensible roles, non-human beings in a primordial terrain, and deliberate adolescent initiation into adulthood.

On the other hand, Shepard observes, industrialized cultures have abandoned nature and divided families, leading to arrested development among its citizens. Poorly matured adults, Shepard says, harbor an infantile duality between themselves and nature, fear the organic world, and attempt to fulfill childish fantasies with patriotism, fundamentalism, social status or, as these inevitably fail, with addictions. Like Glendinning and McMahan, Shepard saw the symptoms of this “childhood botched,” in massive therapy, escapism, and addiction to intoxicants. He described our “increasing injury to the planet” as a “symptom of human psychopathology.”

What Shepard warns the readers in *Nature and madness* (1992, p. 17), “the only society more frightful than one run by children, as in Golding’s *Lord of the flies*,<sup>2</sup> might be one run by childish adults.” We witness these “childish adults” among the leaders of our modern, industrial world, addicted to money, power, prestige, intoxicants, and sex.

### THE ENABLERS

Addicts and abusers typically deny their actions, make promises about changing, and reward enablers, those intimidated into silence or enticed to lend support with a share of power’s rewards. McMahan believes that “normal” acceptance, denial, and even support for ecological destruction “isn’t just misguided silliness, but financial self-interest. Most citizens are invested in or dependent on the lie,” she says. “A lot of money is riding on the insanity of depleting and destroying the biosphere.” Why do victims remain with their abusive, addict partners or parents? Because they get some pay-off, even if the benefit is a misguided sense of security from the dark unknown beyond the relationship.

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<sup>2</sup> The reference is made here to world-wide known work of William Golding (1954).

The status quo resists change by marginalizing and ridiculing the whistle-blowers. “Thus the media stereotypes of people concerned about ecological issues,” explains McMahon, “calling them names such as ‘Carborexics’ or ‘gloom and doomers,’ creating a phoney disorder in people driven to fear because they witness the abuse of the earth.”

In the U.S., for example, the 2009 “Waxman-Markey” climate bill featured free pollution permits for the biggest polluters and loopholes to help avoid genuine emissions reductions. Although scientists now estimate humanity must cut emissions by 80 % from 1990 levels to avoid climate disaster, the U.S. legislation suggests cuts of 4 %. Citizens accept the hypocrisy because they too are addicted to the benefits, the money, power, prestige, and economic growth that perpetuates the trauma.

Politicians and journalists justify and enable ecological destruction because they owe some allegiance to the status quo, to the abusive father in the form of the corporate elite. Like the abused woman who makes excuses for her alcoholic mate, enablers believe they get something out of the arrangement, afraid of a divorce from the domineering power structure.

As in a dysfunctional family, enablers remain invested in the status quo, even as the unfilled promises sabotage genuine efforts to establish meaningful change. We have witnessed similar sabotage during those 26 years of climate conferences that produced no reductions in carbon emissions. Typically, the addict claims a desire “to change,” but fails to act. Individuals may feel trapped in co-dependency with these social systems, and may resort to addictive self-medication to help cope with the despair, addiction driven by ecological trauma.

## RECOVERY

As ecological trauma contributes to addiction, ecological reunion may serve as a means of recovery. Chellis Glendinning writes, “the ultimate goal of recovery is to re-find our place in nature ... to feel, to come alive, to come out from under the deadening of the machines and the mechanistic worldview.” Like Glendinning, Paul Shepard found hope in the fact that, “Beneath the veneer of civilization ... lies not the barbarian and the animal, but the human in us who knows what is right and necessary for becoming fully human.”

We need wildness to find that full, thriving human. We will not find it in the products of our own cleverness, but in the breathing, heart-pumping life

around us, the wildness that forged our cells and our instincts. We will find it in forests, winds, rivers, and creatures whose language is foreign to our ears. Humanity, in the grips of addiction and on a path to destruction, requires an intervention. To be aware means to be active in this intervention.

Addictions always manifest within a meta-system of embedded dynamic systems, a family system, a social system, and an ecological system. The ultimate meta-system, as far as we know, is the universe, which is the ecosystem writ large. We are natural beings, as all others. When our place within these embedded systems feels unhinged, stressful, or traumatic, our private biophysical system, our body-mind system, attempts to rebalance. Self-medication – alcohol, cocaine, or shopping and sex – arises as vain attempts to rebalance. We don't know how to escape from our social co-dependency, so the mind attempts to numb the pain. The "anti-social" radical, the anarchist, or the crazy artist, are also attempting to rebalance the systemic dysfunction.

Shepard saw recovery through rediscovering "this full and natural human." He wrote that to rebuild healthy adults, children must be born in gentle surroundings and grow up exposed to a rich nonhuman environment. A healthy youth must experience juvenile tasks, use simple tools, and learn "the discipline of natural history." Finally, adolescents must learn the "metaphorical significance" of natural phenomena and experience the "ritual initiation and subsequent stages of adult mentorship."

Breaking the cycle of abuse, trauma, and addiction requires a radically new relationship with society and with the more-than-human world. "It is no measure of health," wrote Jiddu Krishnamurti forty years ago, "to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Krishnamurti, Jiddu. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved March 26, 2017: <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/jiddukrish107856.html>

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