The ecological self: narratives for changing times

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Abstract

The challenge of climate change requires that people in developed countries redefine themselves in relation to others, and reappraise how the environment, in turn, shapes us and our expectations for the future. In seeking to understand the complexity of the situation we come up against questions of scale, experience and imagination which undermine our familiar ways of thinking theoretically and phenomenologically. This paper considers some of the inevitable reasons why this psychological undertaking is resisted by many, and provides some cultural context for the individual dilemmas and choices that face us. Drawing on the work of Joanna Macy, a three-part developmental model is presented. Clinical examples, personal narrative and dream illustrate the work.

Keywords

climate change, ecology, self, culture, cosmology, catastrophe, time, story, other-than-human.

Introduction

At an ecotherapy conference in 2018, a presenter observed how difficult it is for us as humans to see ourselves as part of an ecosystem. This comment stayed with me in the form of a question: 'What is it that makes it so difficult for us to see ourselves as parts of a greater whole?' This question forms the central concern of this paper, predicated on the assumption that there is value in being more ecological, and that this in turn has bearing on the climate crisis. This key question leads to consideration of belonging and identity in a changing and threatened world, of the psychological processes that underpin human relationships to the other-than-human world, and how we might reimagine an evolving 'ecological self'.

To frame the discussion, I refer to Macy and Johnstone's concepts of 'business as usual', 'the great unravelling' of the 21st century, including economic decline, resource depletion, mass extinction of species and climate change, and lastly the 'great turning' which involves slowing down damage, increasing sustainability and shifts in consciousness (2012, p. 14). These are stories of a lived reality; signs of our times. There is an implicit psychological dimension to them, a process of selfing, with developmental implications.

The term 'ecological self' is attributed to Arne Naess, Norwegian philosopher and father of the deep ecology movement. The grounding of our sense of self in place is the first premise in understanding his concept: 'Home was where one belonged. Being "part of myself" the idea of home delimited an ecological self, rich in internal relations to what is now called environment' (2008, p. 45). Naess continues thus: 'We tend to confuse our "self" with the narrow ego. Human nature is such that, with sufficient comprehensive maturity, we cannot help but identify ourselves with all living beings, beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not' (2008, p. 81). While honouring Naess's contribution, an updated understanding can widen the concept. Matthews suggests that the deep ecology movement's identification with the universe is assumed ([1991] 2021, p. 181). Paradoxically, I suggest that the idea that 'we' identify with all living beings still represents a narrow view of self, an us-and-them dichotomy. I stumble too over Naess's meaning of 'sufficient comprehensive maturity' which might be taken as a functional outcome of good therapy but does not necessarily imply identification with the other-than-human.

In line with contemporary critiques of the individualistic paradigm, including those in Gestalt, Bateson emphasises that the 'false reification of the self is basic to the planetary ecological crisis in which

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we find ourselves' (quoted in Macy, 2009, p. 243). Macy loosens this construct beautifully: 'The ecological self, like any notion of selfhood … is a metaphoric construct, useful for what it allows us to perceive and how it helps behave. It is dynamic and situational, a perspective we can choose to adopt according to context and need' (2009, p. 244). Both context and need press upon us. Central to the problem in question, I think, is a difficulty with identification with all living beings. I propose that the ecological self can embrace something more expansive. Kohn argues that the self is not localised, and extends beyond a 'particular embodied locus' (2013, p. 105). In locating the self *outside* the skin, he invites taking on other perspectives, other forms of consciousness involving the imaginal, as symbolic representations of the world. This requires a creative approach to the total situation, endorsed by Manley: 'Humankind's global struggle with its relationship to climate change can and should be approached creatively, associatively and abductively rather than logically' (2021). This, Manley goes on to suggest, facilitates 'the removal of binary thinking: an embodied reconceptualisation of self, achieved through creativity' (ibid). I will illustrate below some other perspectives through the use of narrative, dream and the imagined. The notion of the ecological self supports humans to consider our existence as part of the whole network of interconnected relationships; as Rust says, it is 'embedded in the land and interwoven with the web of life' (2020, p. 112). Seeking to clarify the parameters, Bednarek questions the extent to which existing field theory in Gestalt is sufficient to account for this whole network as it presses on our current reality, and extends into the future (2018). It is equally valid to ponder whether our existing constructs of the self adequately fit our purpose. If we adjust one theory to fit our times, we have to adjust the others.

Psychological theories, among others, are being stretched beyond their useful limits, and need to be. They were not made for these times; Gestalt therapy emerged in times of growth, individualism and abundance. Chalquist notes that '[Lewin's] disciplines were not designed to explore the subsurface connections' (2007, p. 119). Kassouf's reframing that we need to begin to think catastrophically (2022) is deeply unsettling yet compelling in its reading of contemporary times. We are entering the territory of the unthinkable. Woodbury, framing climate change as a trauma in the making, claims that we are being forced to 'rethink all that we have learned about trauma in the past century' (2019, p. 3). As Abram suggests, 'we need to release ourselves from the tyranny of outmoded concepts' (2021, p. 53). Since the old paradigms don't necessarily serve us so well, I have chosen to largely move outside established Gestalt texts, whilst our core theories are deeply embedded in my thinking. My approach is cross-disciplinary, drawing on fields such as social anthropology, environmental philosophy, and human ecology.

To infinity or beyond? A question of scale

> To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime's experience … a gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of a woody meadow, the stream at the junction of four small fields – these are as much as a man can fully experience.
>
> (Kavanagh, UD)

The idea that we can scale up aspects of human experience to reveal larger wholes works in principle but is less satisfactory in its application to the enormity of climate change. Morton claims that we have 'entered the time of hyperobjects' (2013, p. 1) meaning 'something far bigger and more threatening' (2013, p. 2), through which 'we can see the effects of climate change … but you can't see or smell climate' (2013, p. 4).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, 'It's too big!' is a common refrain among people grappling with climate issues. This is a part-failure of imagination, the impossibility of direct experience and psychological defence. Abstract imagination on a grand scale defeats us. Perhaps we can begin to imagine the lives of our great-grandparents whose stories may have lived into our own generation. We might also extend our imagination forward to our great-grandchildren. This provides a span of a relatable time of around 250 years only (Magnason, 2021. p. 245)[1]. We cannot conceive of ourselves at the end of time, it is not yet real.

I recall Pyle's framing of the 'extinction of experience', an increasing alienation from the natural world (1993). This loss of phenomenology dulls and diminishes the experience of self. We no longer navigate by the stars or arrange to meet 'by the tree at the bend in the river'. The French concept of '*terroir*' – literally the taste of a place – is deeply embedded in their national identity associated with food. A local smallholder tells of 'a farmer who has no legs', meaning that he doesn't leave his Land Rover as he surveys his fields. 'When we consider the palpable earth around us as though it were an object … we tacitly remove ourselves from the

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world we inhabit' (Abram, 2021, p. 50). This extinction of experience makes us exiles in our own lands. Salmón reminds us that we experience place – and thus our sense of belonging – through our pores (2021, p. 17). The soulful Welsh word '*hiraeth*' is regarded as a keystone ecological concept, 'an intellectual and moral home … an unattainable longing for a place, person, a figure, even a national history that may never have existed. To feel hiraeth is to feel a deep incompleteness and recognise it as familiar' (Chester, 2021, p. 86). Whether we look backwards or forwards, we run into an experiential wilderness.

Linking imagination to phenomenology allows the possibility of identifying with the other-than-human grounded in experience. Being ecologically minded, I appreciate that my morning coffee has come to me through the combined efforts of many people and earth elements. It is far harder to identify with something we cannot feel a connection to. Of course, I am not suggesting that we can fully experience the dizzying extent and variety of the natural world and still stay sane – it is too big! – but that within our capacity we might choose not to stay so small.

An emphasis on the here and now equally distracts us from past and future. It is difficult to situate the impact of human endeavour through the lens of geological time (Hoggett, 2013, p. 85). The temporal aspect of climate change calls for attention: 'The ecological self also widens our window on time. It enlarges our temporal context, freeing us from identifying our goals and rewards solely in terms of our present lifetime' (Macy, 2009, p. 244). I suggest that this allows a less linear experience of time.

Deep time perspectives

The scale of climate emergency is challenging conceptually, especially when we cannot access a felt sense of the scale of threat. 'Ecological awareness means thinking and acting ethically and politically on a lot of scales, not just one' (Morton, 2021/2018, p. 33). We may narrate the sequence of geological events, but 'few of us are able to imagine the right *durations* of geological time without special training. And being able to understand durations is particularly important for us right now, because global warming's effects may last up to 100,000 years' (Morton, 2021/2018, p. 34, italics original).

The decisions we make today will leave their mark on the planet extending beyond the future of our immediate descendants. Pollution and waste created in our lifetimes will affect the state of the planet over thousands of years; the half-life of plutonium is over 24,000 years (Morton, 2013). Of more visible concern, Farrier considers the future impact of rubble from demolition sites, saying '[It has been] estimated … [that] the mass of human-made materials exceed[s] that of all living things on the planet … By mass, there are now more buildings and infrastructure … than there are trees and shrubs … more plastic … than land and marine animals' (2021).

I need to go back and understand the past before I can move forwards. I prepare for a Deep Time Walk[2], during which experiencing a simulation of deep time might change my perspective. Deep Time Walk is an app which can be installed on a mobile phone and narrates the history of the planet through a walk of 4.6 kilometres, each metre representing a million years. It can be used seated for those unable to undertake the walk. The walk is entertaining and instructive, a 'conversation' between a scientist and a fool, with long silences between aeons, allowing the walker to journey through the creation of the planet that represents time and space.

And so I plug in my earphones, open the app and set off. My path is more or less straight, on which I can only get lost in time. Starting 4.6 billion years ago, the first instruction is 'Just walk'. I walk towards the present day, and find my sense of location is quickly disrupted, and as I listen to the narrative of geological time my attention is drawn inwards, not out. I start as a witness to events I cannot comprehend. The formation of the earth from gases and the 'great bombardment'. This is a slow and violent series of unravellings, destructive and creative in equal measure. At 4.3 billion years ago, after I have walked roughly one-third of a kilometre, water appears on the planet. My fluid body connects. Bacteria arrive after almost two kilometres of walking, ancient fossils appear and as tectonic plates shift, continents take shape. I have no personal reference points for any of this. Knowing that the ground beneath me – peaty soils and bedrock of chalk and clay – holds memory of these transformations, helps. I connect that idea with the sense of memory percolating upwards into the minerals of my bones and flesh. After two billion years, Gaia, with its self-regulating tendencies comes into being. At around 3.4 billion years ago I witness the emergence of photosynthesis. I might be breathing as I walk, but there isn't enough oxygen on the planet to sustain life. I walk towards the Ice Age, I continue walking for two billion years, beyond the halfway mark on my journey. The

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numbers on the screen as I walk are getting smaller, but time is measured here in millions of years. Every single step, another million years. Following the development of sexual reproduction, multicellular life takes form around 1.8 billion years ago. I walk on through the Cambrian explosion of 542 million years ago to the emergence of varied life forms. Some trees, insects and butterflies familiar today preceded the dinosaurs. At last, something I can relate to; I remember now, I remember with my dinosaur brain. I begin to picture the huge creatures roaming this wide, marshy terrain, and from this vantage point I can look back and make some sense of what has gone before. It slowly dawns on me that I really have emerged from stardust. I have a new knowing that human life is a critical mass event produced by every evolutionary turn on my walk. Now I take on board, in a more felt and imagined way than before, where I fit in this journey. I can sense the homeopathic trace of memory in my own gaseous nature – oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen. Journeying through time, it is only at around 100 million years ago – just a few more steps – that the life story of the planet can be measured in relatable human terms. Shockingly, it is a scant arm's length that brings me close to now. Have I come to the end of time?

The walk has unravelled something in me, decentring my worldview. I have walked through a new birth story, thicker than any personal narrative. Even though this is a simulated experiment, it gives me enough of a new sense of how I came into the world. I cannot return to my everyday life in quite the same shape as before, and I circle backwards and forward through different temporal dimensions for some time after.

Culture and cosmology

The Deep Time Walk is one way of telling a story about self in the world. At a time of great unravelling where meaning is hard to fathom, we need narratives to make sense of experience. 'I can't say "Things are enormous to the twelfth degree." I can't scale up my language like you can do with numbers. The only way to scale up language is by using poetry, grandmother's mythology, and all sorts of storytelling that humans have used since stories were told for the first time' (Magnason, 2021, p. 245). Many societies are founded on their stories, accounting for the beginning of time and their relationship with the other-than-human world. A Western Judeo-Christian cosmology promotes a deep disconnection from the natural world, of paradise lost. This story shows humankind in the world of matter as atomistic individuals, connections extinguished, as the scientific views of Newton and Descartes propose. This cosmology instils in us the belief that by explaining everything in the cosmos we can have control over it; this position underpins the persistence of the individualist paradigm. Madera writes of the disfigured and alienated mythology of modern times which 'justifies the predatory elite's abuse of power over other people, other creatures, and the extended natural world' (2021, p. 26). There is a blank in the narrative. 'What, then, are the consequences of knowing little to nothing of your ancestors? Or your ancestral lands?' asks Hecht (2021, p. 81). Indigenous Australian cosmology is founded in stories of the dreamtime, weaving connections intrinsic to the animal, matter and human life.

My own dreamworld is a threshold into the great unravelling, dreaming as I do of family, death, impossible tasks, bells tolling, the end of the world. Dreams are in the now, and of the past and the future; I wonder how my dreams are expressions of the collective implicit world. Entering dreamtime evokes the potent stories of the beginning of time which are carried across generations by indigenous peoples throughout the world, becoming an integral part of their cultures (e.g. Wall Kimmerer, 2013, 2020). '"Dreaming" or "dreamtime" refers to a time of fluidity, shapeshifting, interspecies conversations and intersexuality, radically creative moves, whole landscapes being altered. It is often referred to as a "mythical past", but it is not really in *any* time. We might as well say it is *right now*' (Snyder, 1990, p. 91, italics original). Embedded in indigenous cultures is reference to the wisdom of ancestors: 'I might call into the past, far back to the beginning of time, and beg [my ancestors] to come and help me at the judgement. I will reach back and draw them into me. And they must come, for at this moment, I am the whole reason they have existed at all' (in Hecht, 2021, p. 82). Time, for many indigenous peoples, is circular.

A recurring theme in ecological literature is about the loss of 'indigenous knowledge embedded in place' and the paradigm shift by which we might 'begin to see the world as indigenous people see it' (Susuki quoted in Williams, 2021, p. 65). In the developed world, knowledge about the medicinal properties of plants, the diversity of agriculture or protection against wildfires has been lost. Blackie tells the story of the Cailleach, the Old Woman of the World of Gaelic mythology, and the Trickster Crow, who repeatedly unravels the

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tapestry she is weaving (2018, p. 127ff). The story stands as a lesson about change.

A storied representation of self serves to orient any community to its world (Matthews, 1991/2021, p. 7), a symbolic worldview which many societies have been disposed towards (ibid, p. 52). Matthews considers the ecological self not in isolation but in the context of their culture, sensible to the paradox that 'ecosystems consist of individuals and their interactions' (p. 164). She resolves this not by setting the individual and their culture in opposition to one another, but by considering culture as 'a direct expression of human nature or instinct' (p. 165). Kohn confirms that self is a representation of, and adaptation to, environment (2013, p. 76), thus is deeply embodied in culture. A key point made by Matthews is that when a culture malfunctions, disconnection from nature follows (p. 170).

The necessity of 'rapacious extractivism' remains culturally a given; business-as-usual. 'We could not change our modern economy and hence the course of civilisation, without at the same time changing the hidden confirmation of the modern self' (Matthews, 1991/2021, p. 95). So much is true also for personal identity in which 'individual concerns are overridden by societal and contextual factors' (Crompton, 2013, p. 221). Addressing climate change can no longer be seen solely as a matter of individual change. 'The social construction of climate change as a collective concern challenges the underlying narratives of collective identity and invokes a symbolic process of meaning construction based on a new narrative of the social order' (Brulle & Noorgard, 2019, p. 3). I offer a story here about encountering the other-than-human as a result of a dream.

Dreaming with the land: the climate refugee[3]

This was less a dream than a lingering fragment as I awoke – an image of a landscape near my home accompanied by the words '360 vision'. The following morning I walk to the place in my dream. There is a muscular, southerly wind pressing into me. 'I come from the deep south' it seems to say. 'It's unbearably hot there, the land is desiccated, the soil eroded, the rivers have run dry. The crops are failing year after year and my blood was boiling inside my skin, I had to flee. Survival there is impossible'. I ask: 'So where are you heading?' The reply comes: 'I must go north to cool down in the ice sheets and the glaciers of the Arctic'. I insist that it is no good, that the wind must stop now because its heat will melt the ice. 'I don't care, I must do what I have to do or I will die'. I find a place to stop, look around and breathe in the 360 vision. Velvet, dark, peaty fields, freshly ploughed for industrial scale seeding; lines of poplars grown as windbreaks many years ago. Soil erosion has been a problem for centuries on flatlands, the phenomenon known as 'Fen Blow' scuttering seeds, soil and crops in local flurries. The cathedral sitting on the solitary hill seems less fragile than the surrounding landscape; it has remained unchanged for almost a millennium, while the ground I stand on has been drained and intensively farmed for centuries. Nothing before me is really natural: it is a landscape shaped through extractivism, and the convenience of humankind. The wind has blown my thoughts away, but a word arises in me – 'Death'. I drop into an unfathomable heaviness, summoned by a voice unspoken. Cracked open by grief, as Joanna Macy puts it (2009, p. 241). The grief swallows me, and there is a rightness in it. I want to feel it, to acknowledge this moment. As the wave passes I begin to retrace my steps, I notice a stencil on the path 'COVID-19: Keep Social Distance'. It is part of the whole. About to cross over a railway, my route is blocked by a freight train that comes to a halt in front of the gate. It bears containers that arrived through east coast ports from other lands, connecting other peoples and the global economy, 360 vision.

Business as usual

It was the day of brutal winds,
all of them ganging up to blow injustice down.
They sang the changing weather.
I was going nowhere.

(From *Somewhere* by Joy Harjo, 2020)

Someone I worked with during lockdown would drive to a nearby beauty spot and join the session from her car. She worried greatly about her children, fearful for their futures. She stayed in her car, describing sometimes the birds and trees around her, yet unable to move outside her capsule. She told me that to do so would mean having to feel all the unbearable anxieties that disturbed her sleep. It seemed to me that her fear of unravelling was appropriate, given the impending catastrophe of climate change.

While the impossibility of direct experience and imagining such an uncertain future are real obstacles in the formation of an ecological self, the psychological

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reasons for climate inaction are also many and complex. 'Cultural trauma … undermines an individual's sense of security and leads to a destabilization of the self' (Sztompka, 2004, p. 166). Complex emotions may create a perceived gap between our feelings, knowledge and behaviour, another stick with which to beat ourselves. Here lies a difficulty, for this apparent gap presumes a unitary self, 'not one that is torn, ambivalent … nor one whose sense of self, other, environment and so on is governed by powerful narratives, meanings and imaginings; nor one that is besieged by potentially overwhelming emotions such as fear, despair, anxiety, guilt, love or hope' (Hoggett, 2013, p. 57).

Often out of awareness, outer representations of our inner psychological landscape may have their roots in our physical world (Weintrobe, 2013a, p. 203). We use imagery, perhaps, of being ungrounded, of dark clouds looming, of hitting white water, or of a breath of fresh air, feeling as light as a feather.

> *Features of the landscape cross through the frontiers of consciousness to image themselves as psychic beings, but without relinquishing their environmental qualities … Repress the manifestations of this lively interactivity and they return with symptomatic force, over and over, until they receive a place in a more extended, more ecological, sense of self.*
>
> (Chalquist, 2007, italics original)

This imaging of psychic beings points towards a conceptualisation of alternative identities existing within the beyond-human world.

It is in human nature to build strong defences against the intrusion of strong feelings into consciousness, including anxiety. 'Anxiety is most often a vital signal that alerts us to real threats and dangers to survival. It is when these anxieties become too much to bear that we can apply irrational "quick fixes to try to reduce them"' (Weintrobe, 2013b, p. 36). Common among these may be strategies of disengagement from reality, forms of denial or disavowal (Weintrobe, 2013b, pp. 36-38). Even if we are doomed, we don't want to know, or we know and push it down. As Cohen remarks, 'Labelling a state or process as "denial" implies that something special is going on … [and] indicates a state of knowing and not knowing at the same time' (2013, p. 73).

A common trope about climate inaction revolves around apathy. Lertzman considers 'It is possible to rethink conceptions of apathy, not as a clear lack of concern but, rather, as a complicated expression of difficult and conflicting affective state' especially melancholy (2013, p. 130). The ecological self is inevitably highly conflicted; relating to the natural world means accepting that it both 'gives us life but also brings death' (Weintrobe, 2013a, p. 201). We inevitably adapt by splitting. It is beyond the capacity of most Westerners to hold so many facets of experience in awareness.

I consider inter-relatedness and inter-dependence to be mutually inclusive. Some of our climate anxieties may relate to the other-than-human world as the giver of life. Perhaps our failure to see ourselves as part of an ecosystem is connected in part to our dependence for survival upon it; an uncomfortable relationship with dependence is common among humans. Therapists tend to use the mother/infant relationship as a template for adult psychotherapy. Arguably stretching a point, Maus-Hanke extends this thinking to the 'situation between us and "Mother Earth"' (2013, p. 52). While this thinking somewhat tangentially evokes disturbances of parental dependency and attachment issues, it seems to me that inevitably a primary relationship is threatened by climate change.

One unpalatable reality that the climate movement may suffer from is to oversimplify human nature and eschew our destructiveness (Hoggett, 2013, p. 85). The splitting I refer to here may be to see the ecological self as caring, responsive and good. It is eminently possible to destroy the one we love. Unable to bear the end of her marriage and estrangement from her adult children, one woman destroyed all photos and mementoes associated with them, as if they had never existed. It was the end of her world. The other-than-human world equally evokes such primitive forces and holds a mirror to our internal experience.

> Unusually violent acts of nature are neither punitive nor random, vengeful or meaningless … they conform to predictable patterns, one of which … is: *nature turns towards us, the face, we collectively turn toward it*
>
> (Chalquist, 2007, p. 104, italics original)

While it is necessary to examine briefly some of the psychological processes that get in the way of humankind seeing itself as part of a great ecosystem, I experience some of the ideas outlined in this section as alien in their framing. Some of these writers draw

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on psychoanalytical frameworks for their theories, which I find a little over-certain and interpretive. They do, however, open a window into aspects of inner experience; I appreciate the different voices and added complexity to otherwise impenetrable positions. My personal preference is to stay with the messiness of the conflicted states that are revealed rather than try to predict or explain.

The scale of these existential threats is every bit as hard to comprehend as it is to act upon. Who, after all, does not have to engage in serious emotional work to face our own death, never mind the death of the known world and all those we love? It is the work of a lifetime. There are no real words to describe the impact of a future that Woodbury predicts 'will end up causing the deaths of many more humans than were lost in the Holocaust. We are likely talking hundreds of holocausts here, and likely within the span of a single lifetime' (2016, p. 10). People enter therapy with past traumas they need to resolve, accompanied by fears of reliving the breakdown that has already happened. Woodbury (2019) treats climate change as a new order of trauma, one that we can see coming, which makes me wonder about corresponding fears of the breakdown that is yet to come.

Reflections on the future

> We do not know the future. We do not know when the West Antarctic Ice Sheet will collapse. We do not know when the global economy will collapse. We do not know when our cities will collapse. We do not know how quickly seas will rise … We do not know how to act rationally as a species.
>
> (Scranton, 2021, p. 166)

The self that can bear this situation is hard to imagine. The implications for future generations are dire. A 2021 global survey of 10,000 young people found that 45% notice a negative daily impact on their lives (Hickman et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, young people in the Global South are suffering a greater immediate impact than those in the developed West. Although the Western worldview might see it otherwise, climate change is happening now, not at some unknown time in the future. A generation is being shaped by fear, their elders powerless, urgency and privilege both unacknowledged.

Multiple socio-political concerns serve to distract us from the larger issues at hand; it can seem as though the world is unravelling rapidly. Mass migration is attributed to political and economic forces but, underlying these drivers, climate change hides in plain sight. As the number of climate refugees increases, we cannot be sure that there will be safe places for them to flee to. Business-as-usual underpins the prevailing set of assumptions, while the liberal-minded among us read the signs of unravelling. The humanitarian in me is challenged, I do not know how to respond.

It is easy therefore to fall into the trap of fatalism. 'The very *scale* of the problem makes people not want to do anything about it … the bigger the problem the less fixable it seems' (Ray, 2021, p. 75, italics original). It's easier to see that dumping sewage into rivers kills fish than my choices about consumption being destructive. We make an impact whatever we do, and it serves no one to give ourselves a hard time for being human. In times of mass extinctions, we become passive, these extinctions are happening around me, to me, within me, even. How would it be to use in its place the word 'exterminations'? On the one hand, the word is even more alarmist – this is indeed catastrophic thinking – and on the other it carries a kernel of agency; if I am active I can make choices. According to Macy and Johnstone, we are left with questions about what helps us find strength, what deepens our resilience (2012, p. 237).

We need 'the imagination needed to dream beyond fear' (Ray, 2020, p. 10). Macy sees signs of unravelling as markers of the ecological self: 'The sorrow, grief, and rage you feel are a measure of your humanity and your evolutionary maturity. As your heart breaks open, you create room for the world to heal' (2009, p. 214). Two things follow from this: the importance of understanding those who disengage from the reality of climate change without pathologising them, and for those who do engage, keeping things in proportion without becoming overwhelmed. Fear and hope must become companions.

How does this help provide an answer to my original question about understanding ourselves as part of an ecosystem? Stopford moves between the small-self of business-as-usual and the self of the great turning: 'The Ecological-Self … is an expanded self, far greater than the one we currently know' (2021, p. 8). Naess also suggests that 'the self to be realized extends further and further beyond the separate ego and includes more and more of phenomenal world' (quoted by Macy, 2009, p. 244). Here I want to consider the extent of the expansion Naess describes. Firstly, I think this expansion includes perceptions of space and time. If we

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expand our perspective to include identification with all other-than-human beings, we might secondly expand also to *think how they think* (see for example Kohn, 2013; Salazar et al., 2022). Such a multiplicity of perspectives leads to a decentring of ego and a step towards Kohn's concept of 'ecological selves' (2013, p. 78). Kohn's proposition is that as symbolic representatives of the environment which we inhabit, we are in continual adaptation and response to that environment, a web of living thoughts. His account of his life with the Runa Puma peoples in the Amazonian forests of Ecuador illustrates how their worldview is shaped by their imaginal (or projected) thoughts, dreams and perceptions of dogs, jaguars, anteaters and others that are part of their forest. Although Kohn's definition of ecological selves is context specific, I find the concept of taking on multiple perspectives to be consistent with the imaginal worldview I have proposed. It opens the possibility of understanding the place of humankind in a wider paradigm of interconnected perceptions.

Through this shift, we can be curious not only about how we represent ourselves to the world, but how it represents itself to us. As Krzywoszynska puts it, 'For a human being already situated in the world, the task is not to build an image of that world as if they were external to it and looking from afar. Rather, the task is to build a view in it, as part of the world' (2022, p. 95). One further step is to allow that the world is already within me, through mineral, fluid, bacterial, and other non-me elements, as my Deep Time Walk highlighted. How do I simultaneously give voice to the not-me already within me, and the not-me that is outside my skin? Latour expresses 'the need for a new language where becoming-earth is not the same as saying "We are humans in nature"' (2018, p. 86, cited in Manley, 2012). What might we learn from peoples like the Runa Puma about the possibilities of expanding perceptions of the other-than-human? These shifts in perception are the shifts of consciousness advocated earlier.

Importantly, Matthews considers that 'self-increase proceeds … in phenomenological terms, as the deepening of self-meaning' (1991/2021: xvi). Such phenomenologically embodied relatedness provides a way forward through a subjectivity of multiple meanings, which encapsulates the entire existence and cosmology of peoples like the Runa Puma. Further, Matthews suggests that the ecological self requires self-love, 'an intense emotional investment in everything that we see as falling within the circle of our being' (1991/2021, p. 189). An ecological self which is rooted in such an emotional investment is predicated upon our worldview and alignment with a set of values. We value ourselves above others in the developed West at the cost of our humanity. Woodbury questions whether we will 'still be "human" in the wake of all these wild animals disappearing?' (2016, p. 33). At what point in the future will we no longer be human? According to Matthews (1990/2021, p. 143) 'ecocentrism rests on a fundamental moral principle', recognising the intrinsic value of every being within the entire cosmos, consistent with the view of the deep ecology movement.

I propose that the ecological self requires a degree of elasticity in our responsiveness and capacity to adapt moment by moment, such that we may stretch boundaries while holding enough of the already known and familiar at the centre, and still allow ourselves to dream beyond the confines of our skin. Narratives, imaginings and dreams of our times are an integral part of human development, and each needs to find its potential within us. This demands decentring from hub to node in the web of life. Letting go of our structures, assumptions and certainties, re-imagining and telling new stories about the species, rivers, rocks and air we can call kin becomes a radical act of self-preservation. Such radical acts can become foundations for a reimagined relationship with the other-than-human. In 2008 the constitution of Ecuador was changed to honour 'Pacha Mama' or Nature, respecting its inherent right to existence (Madera, 2021, p. 25). Similarly, in 2017 the Whanganui river in New Zealand was granted the same legal rights as a person[4.] (see Guardian, 2017). It seems that we must always return to the past to create the future. How could we rewrite the human species into the story of the world? 'The great turning is a progressive narrative that insists on the power of story to direct our actions and our affects' (Ray, 2021, p. 95). While I welcome the progressive, paradoxically I cannot help but question what Guattari calls the need for 'a new art of living in society' (1995, p. 20, cited in Manley, 2021); rather, I suggest, we need to turn towards an ancient art of living.

I see my initial question about the ecological self as a problem of the postcolonial world. It would make no sense to indigenous people like the Runa Puma who already live by the premise described by Merlin Sheldrake: when we trace the links from a single node to the chain of connected and interdependent matter, we discover that 'To talk about individuals [makes] no sense anymore … "We" are ecosystems that span boundaries and transgress categories' (2021, p. 39). The global threat is the product of the Western mind.

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Notes

[1] I am grateful to Emergence Magazine for permission to include several quotes. The essays I refer to are also accessible online: www.emergencemagazine.com

[2] www.deeptimewalk.org>app, accessed 12th December 2021

[3] My thanks to Steffi Bednarek and Vienna Duff for their support in making sense of the dream I describe.

[4] Aruna Patel Cornish kindly drew my attention to this example

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