

Humans as Midwives for the Earth's Dark Night of the Soul:

A Transpersonal Ecopsychology Perspective

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ABSTRACT: By harnessing fossil fuels for personal use, humans have arguably become the most creative, and the most destructive, species on the planet. Indeed, in order to survive as a species, it is likely that humans need to develop a healthier and more considerate relationship with the ecosystem. Transpersonal ecopsychology is a field that considers these topics by exploring the role of individual transformation in contributing to a larger evolutionary process of psycho-spiritual development – a process that may help humans find their niche in the greater ecosystemic whole. Transpersonal ecopsychology often describes humans as behaving in a destructive fashion that is out of alignment with spiritual principles, and argues that we need to adjust this situation in order to avoid ecosystemic collapse. The current article considers an alternative perspective, namely that human-caused ecological destruction might actually be a sacred and necessary aspect of the spiritual development and transformation of both humans and planet earth. In other words, humans might be undertaking the sacred role of acting as midwives for the earth's dark night of the soul. While difficult and provocative to consider, this dark night might be necessary for the evolution of human consciousness. This article begins with a description of the role of the dark night of the soul in spiritual awakening, followed by an exploration of the possible human role in midwifing the earth's dark night, and concludes with a personal reflection on releasing attachment to the outcomes of environmental activism.

Keywords: Transpersonal ecopsychology, ecopsychology, deep ecology, ecology, dark night of the soul, transpersonal psychology.

“In our tears and agony, we hold our children close and confront the truth: The future is dark. But my faith dares me to ask: What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?”

- Valarie Kaur (November 9th, 2016)

Transpersonal ecopsychology is a growing field that explores the psycho-spiritual aspects of the human place in the ecosystem (Alef Trust, n.d.; Davis, 2011; Davis & Canty, 2013; Maiteny, 2015). While similar to the field of ecopsychology, which investigates the complex relationship between the human psyche and the environment (Greenway, n.d.), transpersonal ecopsychology takes this investigation a step further by exploring the role of individual transformation in contributing to a larger evolutionary process of psycho-spiritual development – a process that may help humans find their niche in the greater ecosystemic whole (Alef Trust, n.d.; Davis, 2011; Davis & Canty, 2013; Maiteny, 2015). Both fields emphasize the need for humans to develop a healthier and more considerate relationship with the ecosystem in order to improve psychological health and avoid ecosystemic collapse [for a more detailed review of both fields, see Schroll and Hartelius (2011) as well as Davis and Canty (2013); also see Fox (1990) and Swan (2010) for additional considerations of the links between transpersonal psychology

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and ecology]. While these explorations have value, a less commonly examined aspect of both fields is the potential role of ecological destruction in a larger, and perhaps necessary, evolutionary process for humans and the planet.

The purpose of the current article is to suggest that human-caused ecological destruction might actually be a sacred and necessary aspect of the spiritual development and transformation of both humans and planet earth. Indeed, humans might be undertaking the sacred role of acting as midwives for the earth's dark night of the soul (Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009). While difficult and provocative to consider, this dark night might be necessary for the evolution of human consciousness. This article begins with a description of the role of the dark night of the soul in spiritual awakening, followed by an exploration of the possible human role in midwifing the earth's dark night, and concludes with a personal reflection on releasing attachment to the outcomes of environmental activism.

The Dark Night of the Soul & Spiritual Awakening

The term dark night of the soul originated within a Christian context, and was coined by the Carmelite priest and Roman Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross. In his sixteenth century book, *The Dark Night of the Soul* [*La Noche Oscura del Alma*], Saint John describes the difficult path that is taken in order to reach mystical union with God (Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009). During the dark night, the spiritual seeker often feels as if God has abandoned them – yet Saint John and other Christian writers emphasize that God can, in fact, be “...more present to us when he is absent than when he is present” (Merton, 1950, as cited in Coe, 2000, p. 293). Indeed, from the Christian perspective, the dark night is believed to be a time when the Holy Spirit is secretly doing deep work on the human spirit. This work is so profound, and unconscious, that it is often mistaken as the absence of God (Coe, 2000).

Within contemporary spirituality, terms and practices that originated within religious traditions are sometimes secularized and removed from their original context (Redden, 2016), and the dark night of the soul is no exception. In secular circles, the dark night of the soul is used to refer to a time of deep crisis that ultimately results in personal growth. Within both religious and secular contexts, the dark night is a difficult time that is also imbued with meaning – a “divine gift in disguise” (Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009, p. 544) that results in profound personal transformation. In other words, removing the dark night from its Christian context does not devalue it (Redden, 2016), as the dark night is an important human experience that is found across many cultures and time periods. For example, Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey* uses comparative mythology to outline a narrative that is shared across cultures, in which a hero goes on an adventure that involves a deep crisis, followed by a return to the “normal” world with gifts to share from the experience (Campbell, 1949).

Research suggests that the psychological turmoil that is experienced during the dark night can be a potent trigger for spiritual awakening – even outside of the context of religious traditions. Taylor (2012a) describes ‘awakening experiences’

as moments of intense well-being during which our everyday perception is broadened, and we become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality that allows us to transcend the sense of ourselves as separate from the rest of the world. Taylor performed a thematic content analysis of 161 reports of these types of awakening experiences and found that, rather than being triggered by religious or spiritual activities, the most commonly reported trigger for these experiences was psychological turmoil (e.g., stress, depression, loss, bereavement). A follow-up study involving a thematic analysis of 90 reports of awakening experiences confirmed that the majority of the experiences occurred spontaneously, outside of the context of religious traditions, and that psychological turmoil was the most commonly reported trigger of the experiences (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017).

It is important to note that the awakening experiences that were analyzed in Taylor's studies (2012a, 2012b, 2013; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017) were collected through personal sources such as the author's website, social media, university courses, and workshops. Thus, it is possible that these recruitment methods resulted in selection bias. However, research by other authors does resonate with Taylor's findings. For example, Hardy (1979) had analyzed thousands of spiritual experiences and also found that the most frequent trigger of these experiences was depression and despair. Similarly, Grof's (2000) work on spiritual emergency suggests that individuals can undergo a positive transformation of their self-system as a result of traumatic emotional experiences. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) interviewed 50 people who had undergone a sudden spiritual transformation and found that the majority of the transformations occurred as a result of tragedy and/or unhappiness. White and Brown (2000) included tumultuous factors such as danger, illness and death on their list of triggers of exceptional human experiences. In a more secular context, research on post-traumatic growth suggests that individuals can undergo positive psychological transformation after a traumatic event (Tedeschi et al., 2018).

Taylor (2012a, 2012b, 2013) argues that the reason psychological turmoil is such a potent trigger for awakening is that difficult experiences often involve a loosening of psychological attachments, such as a need for achievement, a dependence on relationships, and fixed ideas about the future. In this sense, psychological turmoil can result in a stilling of life-energy, where the individual is no longer as consumed with maintaining the attachments, hopes, beliefs and attitudes of their regular life. This dismantling of the ego can create a psychological vacuum within which a new self-system can emerge. According to Taylor (2012b, 2013), temporary awakening experiences can result in a shift in perspective and values, such as increased altruism or optimism, yet the person's original self-system remains intact. Permanent awakening experiences, on the other hand, are usually triggered by lengthy periods of turmoil and result in a sudden, dramatic, and permanent shift that establishes a new self-system. This new self-system tends to involve permanent feelings of increased well-being, connection, altruism, and mental stillness, as well as an intensified perception of reality and decreased fear of death.

In summary, in both Christian and secular contexts, the dark night of the soul appears to be a common trigger for personal growth. These periods of intense difficulty can, in some cases, result in profound spiritual transformation. While the

dark night of the soul has received some attention within the field of transpersonal ecopsychology (e.g., Bache, 2000b), these perspectives have focused largely on the dark night as experienced by humans, rather than the possibility that the earth might be experiencing Her own dark night, of which humans are a crucial part. In addition, the dark night is an important concept to consider given that it is experienced in both secular (Helminiak, 2001) and religious (Durà-Vilà et al., 2010) contexts, and it can be a crucial factor in an individual's personal and spiritual development and transformation. An interesting question becomes, exactly how transpersonal is the dark night? In other words, can aspects of the dark night transcend not only the personal, but the human as well?

Humans as Midwives for the Earth's Dark Night

By harnessing fossil fuels for personal use, humans have arguably become the most creative, and the most destructive, species on the planet (BBC, 1992). Indeed, we have created an inverted ecosystemic pyramid that prioritizes human economic and materialist interests above the preservation of the natural world (Maiteny, 2015). From the perspective of transpersonal ecopsychology, human overconsumption is causing an ecosystemic holocaust, because unlike other species, we are not aligned with our proper niche in the ecosystem (Maiteny, 2015). Indeed, non-human species seem to operate quite naturally within their ecological constraints such that, unlike humans, unrestricted growth does not occur, and ecological harmony is maintained. Transpersonal ecopsychology suggests that humans are unique because unlike other species, we have a level of consciousness, or meta-awareness that allows us to choose whether to live in harmony with the ecosystem. Thus, humans are faced with a basic choice between behaving in a self-serving, consuming mode versus a whole-embracing contextualizing mode. The consuming mode involves continuing on our current trajectory of materialism, overconsumption, and environmental destruction, whereas the contextualizing mode involves taking a transpersonal perspective that considers the larger ecosystemic whole and our most harmonious place within it (Maiteny, 2015).

The approach taken by transpersonal ecopsychology certainly has value, and it is clear that humans need to make important internal and external changes in order to preserve the environment. However, there are aspects of this approach that are rather human-centric and that may, in fact, contribute to the overarching problem. From the perspective of transpersonal ecopsychology, humans have a responsibility to stop, prevent or reverse the ecosystemic holocaust, firstly because we are causing it, and secondly because our "highly developed" levels of consciousness allow us to take a transpersonal perspective on ecology. When examined carefully, this approach contains subtle aspects of anthropocentrism and attachment, such as an emphasis on human consciousness as being capable of making "correct" decisions about the environment, as well as an attachment to our bodies, to our species, and even to the earth itself. This raises several provocative questions such as, what if humans are, in fact, occupying their proper ecosystemic niche at this moment in time – even when we are in a consumptive mode that results in ecological destruction? What if there is a purpose behind the ecosystemic holocaust – a purpose that transcends human understanding?

As described previously, one of the primary triggers of spiritual awakening is psychological turmoil, and within this category, encounters with death are often reported as a primary trigger (Taylor, 2011). It is also perhaps no mistake that the second most commonly listed trigger of spiritual awakening is being in nature (Hardy, 1979; Maslow, 1970; Taylor, 2012a; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). Indeed, these two aspects of awakening – psychological turmoil and the natural world – seem to be deeply interconnected. It could be argued that the ecosystemic holocaust is bringing humans toward an encounter with the death of our species (Bache, 2000a, 2000b), and it is also bringing the earth toward an encounter with Her own death. In addition to encounters with death, physical illness is often reported as a trigger for awakening experiences and for the dark night (Durà-Vilà et al., 2010; Taylor, 2012a). In their exploration of sacred illness, Linders and Lancaster (2013) argue that humans can choose to become aware of the transpersonal aspects of physical illness, which not only imbues their illness with meaning, but also has the potential to transform themselves and others. From this perspective, it is possible that humans are creating a sacred illness for planet earth. And perhaps, as humans become more aware of the transpersonal aspects of this illness, the earth will also somehow become aware of these facets – and transform – as well.

Of course, the idea that the earth is consciously experiencing a dark night (or experiencing anything at all) is a challenging proposition. However, perspectives such as systems theory (Johnstone, 1994), integrated information theory (Oizumi et al., 2014), and Gaia theory [initially proposed by Lovelock (1972) and further co-developed by Lovelock and Margulis (1974); Gaia Hypothesis (n.d.)] suggest that the earth is a complex system in which the whole may be more than the sum of its parts. Indeed, from the perspective of Gaia theory, the earth is a complex system that self-regulates in order to maintain conditions that are optimal for life, such as the earth's surface temperature, atmospheric composition, and salinity in the ocean. Integrated information theory (IIT) uses mathematical equations to suggest that a system's level of consciousness is the result of how much information it is able to integrate. Therefore, according to IIT, any system that possesses a non-zero amount of integrated information experiences some form of consciousness. From these perspectives, it is possible that the earth may be having some form of conscious experience of Her dark night and our human role within it.

Put simply, might it be possible that the earth's dark night is required in order to bring about a shift in consciousness not only for humans (as suggested by Bache, 2000a, 2000b), but perhaps also for the earth Herself? From this perspective, humans are like other species, in that we are doing exactly what we are supposed to do within our ecosystem. Importantly, this does not mean that we should abandon environmental efforts because "everything is happening as it should be." This is not a spiritual bypass (Welwood, 1984) or spiritual narcissism (Cortright, 1997; Lahood, 2010). Rather, this is an acknowledgment of a potentially deep and difficult truth that includes and transcends humans. Indeed, writers in contemporary spirituality emphasize the importance of not mistaking the dark night for psychopathology (Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009). In other words, while the dark night is difficult and may result in deep feelings of despair – the dark night is not the same as depression. The distinction between the two is subtle, and clinicians need to be cautious when navigating this terrain (Helminiak, 2001). Similarly, it is

possible that transpersonal ecopsychology may be mistaking the earth's dark night as a "psychopathology," rather than as the important process of psycho-spiritual development that it is.

At this moment in time, some – but not all – humans are feeling a nudge toward shifting the consciousness of humanity in order to save the planet. For example, Jungian psychotherapist Jerome Bernstein (2012) describes 'borderland consciousness' as a personality trait that involves feeling a deep – and often physical – connection to the natural world. Bernstein argues that borderland personality is part of an evolutionary impetus that is shifting human consciousness toward what Maiteny would describe as the contextualizing mode (Maiteny, 2015). Yet not all humans are borderlanders. Many humans continue on the consumptive treadmill without giving the ecosystem a second thought, while others are somewhere in between. Thus, it is possible that there are shades of grey between the consumptive and contextualizing modes, with each human occupying their unique and proper place in the ecosystem.

This situation means that for some humans, their proper place might be to usher in the earth's dark night through ecological destruction. For other humans, their role might be to become conscious of this midwifery in time to potentially reverse it. In other words, unlike midwifery in the classical sense, in which the midwife is conscious of their role, some humans are not aware that they are midwifing the earth's dark night, because if they were aware, they might halt a necessary process. Other humans, such as borderlanders, are becoming conscious of their midwifery and are taking steps to stop it. Moreover, perhaps it is necessary for both of these roles to be happening at the same time. Indeed, perhaps both of these roles need to operate concurrently in order to usher in a dark night that brings about a transformation of human and earth consciousness, while also giving humans enough time to potentially reverse the ecosystemic holocaust before it is too late. The timely reversal of the ecosystemic holocaust could usher in a new era of human consciousness in which we are more intimately connected with each other, and with the ecosystem, than would have been possible without the earth's dark night (Bache, 2000a, 2000b).

Death and Destruction as a Natural (and Necessary) Process

Death and destruction are common features of the natural world. Carnivorous animals kill each other for food, hurricanes destroy habitats, and naturally occurring fires clear out forests. Some species, such as dinosaurs, go extinct without any human intervention (AMNH, n.d.), and geological evidence suggests that mass extinctions periodically eliminate 95% of all species (Pyron, 2017). In addition, research suggests that the phenomenon of apoptosis, or programmed cell death, occurs relatively commonly in bacteria and is also a universal phenomenon in all life forms (Peeters & de Jonge, 2018). This type of "cellular suicide" seems paradoxical, because at first glance it does not make evolutionary sense for unicellular organisms such as bacteria to self-destruct (Bayles, 2014). However, some argue that while bacteria are singular, they are also part of complex communities, and in some cases it benefits the larger community for the

“individual” to die (Peeters & de Jonge, 2018). As Annie Dillard (1974) wrote in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, “Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me. This is easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe” (p. 178). Put simply, death can be framed as an evolutionary process in the natural world.

As mentioned previously, death is also an important aspect of spiritual development, whether this process involves encounters with actual physical death as a trigger for awakening (Taylor, 2013), or the variety of “psychological deaths” that can occur as a result of the dark night, such as releasing old attachments, or even the death of an entire self-system. Various world religions position humans as having the capacity to become conscious of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and that this knowledge gives us a choice between the tree of life versus the tree of death. The tree of life represents harmony within the diversity of the whole, whereas the tree of death represents disunity and dualism (Maiteny, 2015). These wisdom traditions tend to urge us to follow the path outlined by the tree of life. However, if humans were given the knowledge of both trees, does this not suggest that death has some place in the universe?

Indeed, in his twelve principles for understanding the universe, cultural historian Thomas Berry (n.d.) suggests that, “The universe has a violent as well as a harmonious aspect, but it is consistently creative in the larger arc of its development” (para. 5). It is, of course, the case that natural forms of death and destruction, such as naturally occurring forest fires, help keep the ecosystem in balance (National Geographic, n.d.). However, it is important to keep in mind that just because humans have harnessed the power of fossil fuels, this does not mean that we are no longer a “natural” part of the ecosystem (Pyrn, 2017). Perhaps our destructive role is actually a violent, yet creative part of Berry’s “larger arc” of the development of the universe. Similar to apoptosis, perhaps humans are moving toward the “suicidal feat” (Maiteny, 2012, p. 55) of ecosystemic holocaust because some amount of ecological destruction is necessary for the larger universal whole.

The idea of an ecosystemic holocaust is a difficult pill to swallow. We are so attached to this physical world, that letting go of this attachment feels heart wrenching and can even lead to a sense of meaninglessness and nihilism. However, if we focus on the “larger creative arc” outlined by Berry (n.d.), we could still find meaning, even in ecological destruction. For example, perhaps it is the case that the earth’s dark night will bring about a “collapse” in humanity’s current sense of consciousness, resulting in a massive shift that allows us to reverse the ecosystemic holocaust and continue to exist in our bodies, yet in a permanently awakened state. In other words, the earth’s dark night might not bring about the death of humanity – it might instead bring about the death of old ways of being in the world (Bache, 2000a, 2000b). One way to explore these options is to raise ontological questions about what is actually real. For example, are these physical bodies real? Is this earth real? Or are they symbols of a greater (or deeper) reality of which we are currently unaware?

The philosophical approach of idealism suggests that consciousness is the fundamental nature of reality, with matter being derivative of consciousness (Kastrup, 2014, 2018). For example, Kastrup (2018) proposes that the physical

world that we see around us is actually the thought forms of a unitary, cosmic consciousness that underlies our physical reality. In addition, in their theory of conscious agents, Hoffman and Prakash (2014) use mathematical modeling and computer simulations based on evolutionary theory to suggest that evolution actually favors a situation in which the true nature of reality is hidden from humans. Put differently, evolution does not favor accurate perceptions of reality. Instead, evolution favors tricks and hacks that enhance human survival. Hoffman (2015) suggests that the physical world around us is an interface that allows for these tricks and hacks by hiding the more complex nature of reality from us. This is similar to the desktop icons on a computer, where, for example, the *My Documents* folder is a symbol that represents an underlying reality of circuits. The *My Documents* folder facilitates my ability to get my work done without having to be cognitively overloaded with what is going on underneath (Hoffman, 2015).

Similarly, in his discussion of imaginal ecology, Richtscheid (2006) suggests that humans, and the physical world around us, are symbols of a reality that transcends us. Richtscheid argues that, “An integrated and healthy ecology [...], is one that sees the whole picture, and this means seeing beyond the material and recognizing those aspects of creation that are invisible to our outwards-attuned senses” (p. 148). In other words, trees are of course trees, but they are also symbols of universal existence. Put differently, the letters that you are reading right now are symbols that represent information that I am trying to share with you. It is perhaps the case that this physical world plays a similar role – it is symbolic of a deeper level of reality that transcends us. Richtscheid further suggests that humans have a unique role to play as stewards not only for the physical world, but also for realms that exist beyond the physical.

Importantly, both Hoffman (2015) and Richtscheid (2006) emphasize that even though we do not need to take the interface of the physical world literally, we do need to take it seriously. In other words, even though our bodies and the earth might be a symbolic interface, we can still do our best to take good care of the interface while we are here. This means that, rather than throwing all environmental causes out the window because “everything is happening as it should,” we should actually dive more deeply into the symbolic nature of our bodies and the physical world. Indeed, spiritual traditions such as Tantra (Caplan, 2009) and modern perspectives on embodied spirituality (Ferrer, 2008), both emphasize the importance of embodiment as part of the spiritual journey. Humans are perhaps in the paradoxical situation of needing to fully embody in order to come to a deeper understanding of our symbolic physical world. As Rumi suggests, “Every form you see has its archetype in the placeless world. If the form perished, no matter, since its original is everlasting” (Rumi, n.d., para. 13).

Personal Reflection & Conclusion

This article evolved out of a bodily sensation that I have experienced several times when engaging in soul retrieval practices that involve connecting with the earth. During these practices, I often experience a profound sense of knowing that the earth is okay. It is difficult to put this feeling into words, but the essence of it is that

even though humanity and the earth are going through a difficult time, there is an overarching “rightness” and process that must be followed. I want to make it clear that this feels much different than a spiritual bypass. Instead, it feels like a commitment to do my personal work of soul retrieval, spiritual embodiment, and environmental activism while also *releasing my attachment to the outcome*. In other words, the outcome of my efforts might not end up being a reversal of the ecosystemic holocaust or an experience of the universe becoming more conscious of itself. The outcome of my efforts might be something entirely different. After all, even though I recycle and shop with reusable bags and belong to a community supported agriculture group, I am also firmly embedded within a consumerist system. When I check in deeply with my soul and with the soul of this earth, I sense in my body that this is okay. It is a necessary part of the human experience and of the earth’s experience.

In conclusion, perhaps the consuming mode and the contextualizing mode outlined by Maiteny (2012, 2015) are both sacred roles that need to be fulfilled at this time. The consuming mode acts as a midwife to the earth’s dark night, while the contextualizing mode keeps Her stable enough to get through the difficulties. Perhaps humans have been acting from their proper ecological niche all along – even with our tendencies toward overconsumption, death and destruction. As Unitarian Universalist minister Jeremy Taylor shares in the book *Living Deeply* (cited in Schlitz et al., 2008):

It’s like being in a rainstorm – you don’t have to be sorry for the raindrops when they smash into the ground; you don’t have to be sorry for the trees that get their limbs blown off. They survive; it’s part of their life. The same is true for the rest of us. [...]

A hurricane is one thing, and bullets and bombs and poisonous industrial waste are something else, but ultimately I believe they are the same – forces that shape our evolution, individually and collectively. It is the archetypal cauldron of change. And to the extent that we are conscious at all, we must participate in this process of change as consciously and responsibly as possible. (p. 195)

The question becomes, can we choose to trust the overarching, creative intelligence of evolution and of this universe, even in the midst of the earth’s dark night? Can we choose to see our current darkness as the darkness of the womb, rather than as the darkness of the tomb? By becoming more consciously aware of our role in the earth’s sacred illness, it is possible that humans might come to appreciate the sacred ecological niche that we have been inhabiting all along.

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