

## **Chapter 10: Eco-Paganism: A "sacred relationship with the world"**

"To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour".  
*Auguries of Innocence*, William Blake

All participants found a "sacred relationship with world" (Zoe) through embodied communication with the spirit of place or "honour[ing] the little weed in the garden" (Jocelyn), a practice Barry described as listening to the threshold brook. Some protest site Eco-Pagans described similar experiences, while others explained how simply living in the woods catalyzed "deep spiritual experiences" (Lauren) that could be life changing. Although there is much common ground, those in each group engaged with place in different ways, and applying the enactive process model can clarify the dynamic relationships between these experiences.

The last three chapters provided a thick ethnography of Eco-Paganism and introduced a complex weave of related themes. Eco-Pagans from across the range identified in my typology (fig. 7) interacted with the processes of connection and thinking with place in different ways. Before turning to my final conclusions, I apply the enactive process model to explain these intricate patterns in detail, and demonstrate the correlation between the threshold brook and the wilderness effect. I thus demonstrate how urban and site Eco-Pagans find a "sacred relationship with world" through various means in very different places.

Reflecting on my autoethnography helps illuminate the overall shape of my fieldwork. This is especially apparent when I unpack my embodied experiences of the processes of connection. From this context I then explain the relationship between these processes and thinking with place using my enactive process model, and identify the importance of intent. In 'Sacred Ecology' I opined that embodied knowing empowered environmental activists (Harris, 1995), and I can now consider that claim more carefully.

Although the erotic wasn't talked about much in interviews, I consider its significance as a subtext, noting the influence of ecofeminism on Eco-Paganism. This influence may help explain the lack of gender differences in participants ways of knowing, but I offer an alternative hypothesis based on recent research. I conclude by presenting the pattern that has emerged from my fieldwork that shows how my enactive process model explains the Eco-Pagan's "sacred relationship with the world".

### **Reflection: Autoethnography**

My experiences are notable not only because I lived in both worlds during my research, but because

*I am* the field and at the heart of my research methodology lies a heightened reflexive awareness of my life world that enables me to sense the process of embodied knowing ('Autoethnography: "You're not just studying then - you're *living* it").

Thus, I truly know this sacred relationship - both inside and out. My autoethnography, which was written before the bulk of interviews took place, helps illuminate the patterns of my fieldwork from within. My use of the felt sense is apparent on several occasions, as when "I 'felt' a strong 'energy' while I held 'Mr. Pointy' [Oak's antlered stag skull]" (thesis:105). Later, when sitting in the tree, I "can sense anger at the intrusion", and then "get a sense of understanding from the tree" (thesis:107). I wondered if listening to my intuition was "the most important thing I've learnt from Paganism" (thesis:106), and indeed my training meant that I could easily listen to the felt sense. Being aware of the felt sense requires an embodied reflexivity that enhanced my awareness of my own process, and this is apparent when I was looking for bender poles. On this occasion I needed to open up "my senses to the woods", and recognised that the "the knack" of seeing potential bender poles requires:

a particular sensory acuity that feels like I'm relaxing into it and opening myself up to the space (thesis:105).

This sounds like - and felt like - I was shifting my awareness down the cognitive iceberg into a light trance state that both increased my feeling of connection to place and my sensory acuity. Several participants describe similar experiences, notably Rob and Barry.

The impact of the wilderness effect is also apparent when I describe my "feeling of lightness" and "sense of openness", (thesis:108) and my ambivalence about returning to an urban life. Although my autoethnography concludes shortly after I returned to London, my practice changed significantly. While on site I wrote:

When I lived in London I used do a brief ritual to greet the Elements. Why aren't I doing my Elements ritual anymore? 'Cos it's all here! Everyday I go and collect water, everyday I light a fire; I walk on the bare earth and spend most of the day under the open sky. In London I needed to make an effort to stay connected - here it just happens (thesis:107).

I did indeed have to "make an effort to stay connected" on my return to urban life, and soon began to practice my "ritual to greet the Elements" again.

## **PROCESSES OF CONNECTION**

I identified six related processes which can catalyze a sense of connection or be used intentionally to enhance an existing relationship. One of the most complex of these processes is what Barry called the "threshold brook ... experience". This is a moderated wilderness effect which focuses on specific, perhaps apparently insignificant aspects of the local environment. The power of a classic wilderness like

the Grand Canyon can become apparent within days, whereas the less than pristine wilderness of a protest site works its magic over months. In an urban location the influence of the organic environment is diminished even more, hence the need to listen carefully for the quiet voice of the threshold brook. Such subtle embodied communion with place requires an intentional effort which may involve meditation. However, simply taking time to fine-tune our awareness of the organic environment opens us to the sensory richness available in intimate local relationships. As with more typical experiences of the wilderness effect, the threshold brook is deeply healing and can inspire a spiritual sensibility.

The processes of connection are closely interrelated and interact in significant ways, but identifying them individually has heuristic value. Although the significance of each will vary for individuals and across a lifetime, they have recognizably different degrees of importance in my fieldwork overall: In that order, they are the wilderness effect and similar intimate experiences of the organic environment, the felt sense, ritual, trance, meditation and entheogens. I have already detailed how these processes of connection impact on urban and site Eco-Pagans, so focus here on common threads and how my own experience can illuminate the emerging pattern.

<b>Urban Eco-Pagans</b>	<b>Site Eco-Pagans</b>
Adrian, Barry, Emily, Gordon, Jocelyn, Mark, Mary, Michael, Sally, Zoe	Adam, Adrian, Dave, Debbie, Ian, Jake, Jan, Jo, John, Lauren, Millie, Oak, Rob, Ray
Adrian, Barry, Emily, Gordon, Jocelyn, Sekhara, Sally, Zoe	Adam, Debbie, Ian, Jake, Jan, Jo, John, Oak, Rob, Ray
(Adrian) <sup>1</sup>	Jo
Adrian, Barry, Emily, Gordon, Jocelyn, Mark, Mary, Michael, Sekhara, Sally, Zoe	Adam, Adrian, Dave, Debbie, Ian, Jake, Jan, Jo, John, Lauren, Millie, Oak, Rob, Ray
Adrian, Barry, Emily, Gordon, Jocelyn, Mark, Mary, Michael, Sekhara, Sally, Zoe	Adrian, Dave, Debbie, Jan, Jo, John, Millie, Oak, Ray
Barry, Gordon, Mark, Sekhara. (Adrian)	
Adrian, Barry, Emily, Gordon, Jocelyn, Mark, Mary, Michael, Sekhara, Sally, Zoe	Adam, Dave, Debbie, Ian, Jan, Jo, Rob
Adrian, Barry, Mark	Ian, Jake, Lauren, Rob

**Table #1: Processes of Connection**

All of these have influenced my sense of connection, although different processes have been significant at different times. As I moved between urban and protest site status during my research, I include myself in whichever column was appropriate when a given process had the greatest impact. Again my experience is illuminating. The wilderness effect has had a profound effect, and has made me much more attentive to the threshold brook, which suggests this will be a lasting influence. The felt sense has been significant for me in both urban and site situations, and as I have trained within a Tradition, I would be expected to find it easy to use. I now realize

<sup>1</sup> I worked as a part-time gardener for a few month several years ago and found it significant.

that I have been using my felt sense in a fairly ad hoc way for years, in that it is fundamental to many aspects of my Pagan practice, and again my experience echoes that of participants. In addition, the way a Focusing interview can reveal an "embodied understanding" of an "interbodied experience" (Todres, 1999: xx [2007: 39]) parallels the experiences described by participants of the role of the felt sense in healing and spiritual connection (inter alia, Mary and Mark).

When I first became involved with Paganism, formal ritual was very significant as it was my main practice. Over time such ritual became less important, and in this my experience parallels that of most participants. I practiced ritual on site and in my urban life, and like other Eco-Pagans found simple, personal rituals much more significant than formal ones. Trance has had a significant influence on my spiritual path, although I do not practice as regularly or - I estimate - as deeply, as Barry, Gordon, Mark and Sekhara, and not at all while on site. I can only guess why deep trance practice is entirely absent from my site fieldwork, but practical difficulties seem to be the most likely factor. Meditation has become more important for me over the last few years, but I meditated much less on site for purely practical reasons, and this may help explain why fewer site Eco-Pagans do so. Although we might expect meditation to be more common amongst Traditionalized Eco-Pagans, reference to my 'Typology of Eco-Paganism' diagram (fig. 7) shows that the opposite is the case, which further suggests that circumstances rather than temperament limits meditation on site.<sup>2</sup> Entheogens have had an occasional and often profound influence on my spiritual path. Because I have only used entheogens in an urban context, I make that practice almost as common in both groups.

## **Processes of Connection and Thinking With Place**

The processes of connection are intimately braided with thinking with place, and in teasing out this complex relationship I need to clarify the different ways in which each can operate. There is far less distinction between processes of connection and thinking with place that this analysis might imply, but it remains a useful exercise. Processes of connection can function in two modes: Some - notably the wilderness effect and some similar experiences - work mainly in the background to enable an embodied awareness of connection. Others, like the felt sense and trance, enable us to be aware of specific instances of connection, while the threshold brook, ritual, meditation and entheogens can function in both ways. Thinking with place has two similar modes: It operates in the background all the time for everyone but can become more palpable. We think with place much the time although we are rarely aware of it (inter alia, Clark: 1997; Preston: 2003), and how Eco-Pagans are influenced by the places they occupy is apparent in both the power of the wilderness effect and in the discomfort some report when in an urban environment (inter alia, Barry, Emily, Ian and Rob). But all Eco-Pagans sometimes use processes of connection like ritual, trance, meditation, entheogens and the felt sense to think with a place more explicitly.

These facets describe similar phenomena from different perspectives, as they all

<sup>2</sup> This remains a moot point. It may be that site Eco-Pagans have less of a need to use meditation as a process of connection because of the impact of the wilderness effect, but other factors like the availability of entheogens ('magic mushrooms') and cultural influences complicate any such conclusion.

depend on the relationship between the tip of the cognitive iceberg and the rest of that triangle: The wilderness effect and related experiences are background thinking with place that can disrupt "culturally reinforced, dualism-producing reality processing" (Greenway, 1995: 131), while the felt sense, trance, meditation, entheogens and aspects of ritual, operate by shifting awareness down the cognitive iceberg. As Greenway notes, the "nondualistic" mode of consciousness produced in extreme instances of the wilderness effect is similar to some states produced by meditation or psychedelics (Greenway, 1995: 131-132). In each case an awareness can emerge that organism and environment are enfolded (Varela et al., 1991: 217) and our "cognitive identity" is created by a "communion with ... landscape" (Preston, 2003: 100).

Intent plays an important role throughout. Although background thinking with place proceeds below conscious awareness, we can resist the wilderness effect (Greenway, 2006; Taylor, 2006), and listening to the threshold brook requires attention. Trance and the felt sense are usually deliberately used to increase our awareness of connection, while the influence of ritual, meditation and entheogens depends on the practitioners intent, and can be used to enhance a specific relationship or encourage a more general sense of connection. In practice all these processes are fluid, simply because the intentional 'self' that is thinking is always *woven into place*, but in each case:

The environmental experiences that structure cognition will be different depending upon where the agent of knowledge is located, what practices the agent engages in, and what cultural values the agent possesses (Preston, 2003: 72).

For site Eco-Pagans the steady tone of the wilderness effect is the primary source of an embodied sense of connection, while for urban Eco-Pagans it is the more subtle voice of the threshold brook, but in each case it inspires and empowers activism.

## **Motivation**

In his study of environmental philosophy, Hay emphatically states that "*the wellsprings of a green commitment ... are not, in the first instance, theoretical: nor even intellectual. They are, rather, pre-rational*" (Hay, 2002: 2; author's emphasis). This is an important insight, with which I concur. However, he then claims that this pre-rational impulse springs from an "instinctual and deep felt horror" at "the scale of the destruction wrought" on our environment, and lists diverse thinkers whose "observations rub shoulders" with his own (Hay, 2002: 3). In fact there is little common ground between the thinkers Hay lists, beyond an agreement that the impulse is pre-rational in some way: Shepard diagnosed a dislocation from nature (Shepard, 1982) and Wilson hypothesized an innate "biophilia" (Wilson, E.O., 1993: 350), while the poet Snyder wrote that the inspirational power of the organic environment is "rooted in the belly" (Snyder, 1980: 3). Although each diagnosis is helpful, none have the explanatory power of the insight common to ecopsychology, the cognitive science of enactivism, Bateson's anthropology and the philosophy of Clark and Preston, that "[t]he physical

environment is not just a site in which mind operates; it is a characterful place that influences the products of the mind" (Preston, 2003: 88).

By integrating these insights into the enactive process model and applying it to my fieldwork material, I have revealed how place provides activists with a powerful inspiration that they interpret as spiritual. The processes of connection I have mapped offer a solution to the dislocation Shepard saw, clarifies Wilson's notion of biophilia and fleshes out Snyder's metaphor.

Both thinking with place and the processes of connection are "pre-rational" in the sense that they do not involve consciously thinking through propositions. They are grounded in a more fundamental embodied cognition that operates largely outside conscious awareness. However, we must be cautious, as 'pre-rational' hints at dualistic notions of 'reason' as opposed to emotion. In fact Damasio's explanation that emotion is integral to cognition (inter alia, Damasio, 1994; 2003) is borne out in Plows' discussion on emotional knowing amongst activists:

It is not that there are rational responses (sound) and emotional responses (faintly spurious) ... rational appreciation is symbiotically connected to the emotional experience (Plows, 1998b: 173).

With this caveat, Hay's claim that the source of environmental commitment is pre-rational is confirmed by my research, but the consensus I identify is more useful than his vague invocation of "instinctual ... horror" (Hay, 2002: 3).

## **Sex, Gender and the Erotic**

### ***The Erotic***

Although my Eco-Paganism literature review highlighted the influence of ecofeminism, there was little explicit evidence of it in my interviews. However as noted in that review, the influence of both feminism and ecofeminism pervades the movement, and it's apparent in Eco-Paganism's appreciation of embodied knowing. Several ecofeminists discuss erotic embodied knowing (inter alia, LaChapelle, 1992; Starhawk 1982), and the sensual body is important for many Pagans, while five participants - two men and three women - spoke in terms of the erotic. The erotic is a complex concept involving far more than genital sexuality, and ties in with the main themes of this thesis. The "sensual connection" of the erotic engenders "mutuality and empowerment" and draws on passionate, embodied ways of knowing (Isherwood, 1996: 53). These themes are apparent in the interviews: the erotic body as a source of knowing and connection (Gordon, Jocelyn and Zoe), ecstatic ritual (Mary) and erotic power as a source of "energy [...] for empowerment" (Rob). In fact, as I suggested in 'Sacred Ecology', the erotic is process of connection (Harris, 1995: 152). Given that sexual ecstasy is a dramatic example of a shift in awareness down the cognitive iceberg, and is our most familiar experience of deep connection, we might be surprised that the erotic wasn't more significant. However, "ours is not an erotic culture" (Harris, 1995: 152), so perhaps this is to be expected.

### ***Gendered Ways of Knowing***

There were no obvious gender difference in preferred ways of knowing amongst

Eco-Pagans, with women and men showing equal sensitivity to their embodied knowing. The influence of ecofeminism may be a factor, but recent research emphasizing the role of social context in determining preferred modes of cognition offers a more grounded possibility. Ryan and David question the idea that there are "stable, gender-related differences" in how "people acquire and process information", and conclude that "individuals can utilize varying degrees of connected or separate approaches to knowledge ... depending on the demands of the social context" (Ryan and David, 2004: 699). Their research suggests that men and women tend to use "connected knowing" within a group they identified with (Ryan and David, 2004: 693), and given the close bond amongst Eco-Pagans - especially on a protest site - we would expect a predominance of approaches which emphasize embodied cognition. It also seems likely that processes of connection can overcome some of the more obvious aspects of socialization, but without comparative research this remains no more than a plausible hypothesis.

### **Conclusion: A Model of Spiritual Understanding**

This chapter used the enactive process model to explicate the overall patterns of my fieldwork material. I analyzed the dynamics of the processes of connection and their intimate relationship with thinking with place, clarifying the different ways in which each can operate. I explained how the power of place can inspire activists, unpacked the significance of the erotic in Eco-Paganism and clarified the lack of gender difference in preferred ways of knowing amongst participants.

My fieldwork touched the individual threads of many lives, and my writing has woven them into a tapestry with a distinct pattern: By various means we slip down the cognitive iceberg to become aware of "a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem" (Bateson, 2000 [1972]: 467). This plunge into the deep body awakens us from the dualistic dream that we are separate from the "wisdom of the body" (Harris, 1995: 152). We experience this psychological shift phenomenologically as a sense of spiritual connection that allows us to "attune ... to the natural world", and can feel

[l]ike being in a great big dream, relevant messages are being spoken everywhere, telling me things I need to hear, and to which I need respond (Fisher, 2006: 103).

Such messages were spoken by Lauren's waterfall and the threshold brook, and we heard of their power to change lives. In as much as the immanent sacred is that which enables communion with the world and offers spiritual knowing, its source is the deep body which blurs into our organic environment. However deeply we drink from this source - a threshold brook perhaps - the depth of potential implicit knowing will never be drained and the experience of connection remains ineffable.