Eco-Narrative Practices:

Re-Storying Our Relationship with the Earth

Ken MacLeod, MTS, RMFT
Student Counselling Services
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada

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Abstract

A dominant story for humans within western society is that they exist somehow separate from the Earth using it only as a resource to benefit them. This disconnect contributes to many of the problems people, communities and the Earth experiences. Eco-narrative practices integrate narrative therapy ideas with ecocentric concepts from ecocentrism, deep ecology, ecotherapy and permaculture to address problems impacting people, the Earth and the relationship between the two. This combination can help facilitate a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, a re-storying of our relationship with the Earth. It can be a way of addressing problems through integrating therapy and social/environmental justice work for a more sustainable future. This paper illustrates eco-narrative ideas in individual and collective practices.

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Eco-Narrative Practices

> It is the destruction of the world
> in our own lives that drives us
> half insane, and more than half.
> To destroy that which we were given
> in trust: how will we bear it?
> Wendell Berry (from *A Timbered Choir,* Counterpoint Press, 1998, as found in Macy, 1998, p. 25)

> It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story (Thomas Berry, 1990, p. 123).

> Tell me the story of the river and the valley and the streams and woodlands and wetlands, of shellfish and finfish. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and roles that we play. Tell me a story, a story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, the story that brings us together in a valley community, a story that brings together the human community with every living being in the valley, a story that brings us together under the arc of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night . . .
> (Berry, 1990, p. 171).

In a world directly impacted by human activity to the point of destroying the very ecosystems that sustain us all, what would it look like if as narrative therapists we could ask questions that could help facilitate the telling of such a new story as described above by Thomas Berry? What impact would it have on the problems that people and communities experience? What difference would it make to them and their sense of identity and purpose in relation to the Earth? What difference would it make to us all if we did therapy "as if the whole earth mattered" (Buzzell-Saltzman, 2009)? Eco-narrative practices are ways I've been developing and playing with over the last few years exploring these questions and others.

I believe that how western society has storied its relationship with the Earth, a story that says we are somehow disconnected and separate from the Earth, has contributed to many of the problems experienced by people, communities and the Earth. This idea of such a disconnect is shared by many (Berry, 1988, 1999; Coates, 2003; Cohen, 1997, 2003; Glendinning, 1994; Kolton, 2006; Macy, 1998, 2012; Seed, 2005; Swimme, 1992). The larger context of the Earth which sustains us all has been a missing component in addressing problems in most therapy and community work practices (Clinebell, 1996; Cohen, 1997, 2003; Conn, 1999, 2003; Fisher, 2002; Glendinning, 1994; Hillman, 1992; Roszak, 1992, 1995). I feel it has been a missing component in narrative practices as well. I believe the larger context of the Earth has been a missing component due to anthropocentric or humanocentric thinking. Moving to an ecocentric, or Earth centred one, can be a helpful paradigm shift for people and the planet (Holmgren, 2002; Johnston, 2002; Macy, 1998, 2012; Rowe, 1990, 2006; Seed, 2005).[1]

Eco-narrative practices integrate narrative therapy ideas with ecocentric concepts from ecocentrism, deep ecology[2], ecotherapy[3] and permaculture[4] to address problems impacting people, the Earth and the relationship between the two. A more detailed exploration of the theories that have influenced eco-narrative practices is for another paper. The purpose of this paper will be to illustrate some of its practices on an individual and collective level.

Eco-Narrative Practices with Individuals

In developing eco-narrative practices, I have had many rewarding experiences in integrating ecocentric ideas into a therapeutic practice utilizing narrative frameworks. As a narrative therapist, I am always listening for alternative stories, the "absent but implicit" (White, 2007). As an eco-narrative therapist, my ears and eyes and questions are searching for the eco-

stories as well. These stories can be woven in with other alternative stories of identity and action.

One way I have begun to practice eco-narrative work is to physically get outside. At the university where I work in the Student Counselling Services, I will often take students for walks and carry on the therapeutic conversations outdoors. In this context I can ask such questions as:

- What difference does it make that we're having this conversation outside as opposed to in my office? Why?
- What allows that difference? What do you see, hear, smell that contributes to your experience?
- Why are these elements important to you? Is there story of other outdoor connections that can help me understand this significance?
- What difference does this make to the problem?
- What does it mean to know this about yourself in relation to the outdoors and problems?
- Where might this knowledge take you?

On these walks while bringing the sights, sounds and smells of nature into the therapeutic conversations many interesting insights and shifts have occurred. Coyotes, gophers, and Canada geese have been met along the way. They have all been a part of the conversations in imaginative and significant ways.

On one occasion, I was walking with a woman struggling with the "chaos" of a recent divorce. "Chaos" was interfering with everything in her life, in particular her studies and ability to focus. As we walked along the river paths near the university, externalizing and exploring the impact of "chaos", we saw a coyote up ahead some distance on the path. It stood looking down on us from the brow of a hill. We stopped and stared back. The silence of the moment seemed to still "chaos". After some time the coyote turned around and went off the path towards the river bank. It's den was probably nearby. We decided without words to also turn and go the other way.

Silence or really the sounds along the river path continued to be with us. Geese honked from above and flew by. The river flowed by below us. Birds sang in the trees. A breeze rustled the leaves and stirred aromas across our path. After a while I asked, "This may seem like an odd question but I wonder what the coyote would say about "chaos" in humans' lives. What would it have to say to us? Would it laugh at us or teach us what is of more importance?"

The student breathed deeply, laughed a bit and sobbed a bit. She reflected on how significant it was to see that coyote for it reminded her of how important her studies and choices were in her life. She noted that the experience of being outside, getting distance and fresh air helped her regain respect for herself. The encounter with the coyote allowed her to re-connect to her values and reasons behind what she had chosen to do in her life, become a veterinarian. I asked what was pushing "chaos" aside and she said "clarity". For her it was a clarity informed by her connection to nature, animals and a result of a renewed sense of respect for herself.

I'd like to say I used some great eco-narrative questions that I could share here that helped this therapeutic conversation but I didn't necessarily at that time. I could have continued in the direction of externalizing nature, pursued a remembering conversation of nature's or animals' role in her life that affirmed those values bringing a larger community of support, human and non-human, into the conversation. I could have helped thickened the stories of re-connection with nature through any number of narrative practices I feel, assisting us in coming to these conclusions of her sense of identity and direction now. These are practices that I have incorporated overtime in my eco-narrative work, inside and outside of my office.

In the weeks prior to meeting with this student, I had been reading *Coyote Wisdom: The Power of Story in Healing* by Lewis Mehl-Madrona (2005) and was aware from other contexts as well of the rich history of the coyote's roles, often as a trickster, in indigenous cultural stories.

As a result, I was curious what this coyote might say and what it could teach us, how it might trick “chaos” and asked such externalizing questions, broadening our audience so-to-speak.

On this occasion my questions also arose from the immediacy of the relationship to the land in that moment and my curiosity of how it could inform us. It was as much the environment in which we found ourselves as the questions that facilitated a different relation to “chaos” for both of us. It was the experience itself of witnessing the coyote, being engulfed in the ecology that surrounded us, being a part of it, the sights, smells, sounds, and aware of the significance of it all together that I feel influenced the conversation. These were, to me, ways of knowing beyond language and culture, informed by the Earth itself.

What also made a difference was that I could breathe and breathe fresh air. I wasn’t breathing in diesel fumes, grit or grime from the bus depot outside my open window at my old office. Nor was I breathing in the re-circulated conditioned air of my new office which has sealed windows that do not look outside but into another enclosed attached building. On this walk outdoors, I was breathing fresh air and so was the student.

As a result of being outdoors away from my office I also wasn’t worried about what questions to ask. I was not as influenced by dominant therapy discourses that I don’t necessarily agree with or find that helpful for the students I see. On that day, I slowed down because nature was slowing me down. I was focusing on and attending to the moment I was in. It was not so much using nature as a tool, an anthropocentric way of thinking, but being with nature, a part of nature and listening ecocentricly that I feel helped us move forward.

On another occasion, this time in my office, I was working with a man who was struggling with “loneliness”, who had difficulty finding a partner. He told me that he had recently moved to an acreage outside of the city. As a result, he said he was beginning to have a

different understanding of his relationship with “loneliness”. On his land there was a huge buffalo rubbing stone, a huge bolder used by buffalo in the past over the centuries as a place to scratch themselves. For this man, this had huge significance in connecting him to the centuries of buffalo that use to roam the Prairies. He would sit on top of this bolder and know he was a part of something larger across time. He said it changed his relationship with “loneliness” for the better. He simply was not lonely there. He was a part of something larger than himself and fully alive.

An encounter with a skunk nearby was a turning point for him as well in more ways than one. Upon seeing it, he did turn and go the other way but as a result also began thinking about his connections with aspects of the world other than just the human one he felt he was missing out on. He was now connecting with his land and its creatures in a meaningful way.

As I listened to this man’s stories, I asked for details about the land, where it was, what the place looked like, smelt like, what he did there, where he walked, what he saw, how being on the land impacted his sense of “loneliness”. I pursued landscape of identity and action questions in relation to the problem of “loneliness”, which, upon reflection, take on a different meaning for me now. How important it became to take this practice beyond the metaphor of landscape and ask the questions in terms of his relationship and meaning of that specific landscape. What was also important was expanding the time continuum beyond his life span, into “deep time”[5], an influence from deep ecology, back to the time of the buffalo.

In looking and listening for eco-stories in people’s lives I have found that they can come from unexpected places. Polite chit chat about the weather with someone as we walk down the hallway to my office has opened up lots of stories. “Why do you think we feel better on a sunny

day? What difference does the weather make on problems? Why? What are some examples or stories you can tell me to help me understand why?"

One day a student I had been seeing who was struggling with a difficult decision whether to leave to attend another university, came in with a very short brush haircut. I commented on it and asked what it felt like in the wind. This one question took our therapeutic conversation down pleasant unforeseen pathways. It led to a story of running by the river and feeling the wind through his hair.

I asked him what difference did it make to his sense of himself when he had those experiences? What did he know about himself at those times of running with the wind that might help him with his concerns and decisions at this time? He spoke about a sense of confidence, of knowing, and of clarity. He said that when he brought those aspects to this decision of staying or leaving for another university it became obvious what direction he would go. He decided to go for run by the river right after the session to reflect more on the direction he was leaning towards.

We explored further the history of running and of the wind in his life and their ability to connect him to confidence, knowing and clarity. Other stories came out of feeling life circulate through his body drawn in through breath and wind, of feeling a part of something larger giving him such knowledge. He knew very well he could make such difficult decisions because he had done it many times before in such contexts.

As with any narrative therapeutic conversation one never knows where one will end up. We could have taken any number of paths leading to any number of outcomes. But the wind took him back to an understanding of himself that I believe was different from the pressures of expectations and other social constructs that influenced his concerns about following others

wishes for him. A sense of connection to purpose, agency and something larger than himself came as a result of the wind. I think the value of listening for and picking up on a context outside, literally, the socially constructed ways of knowing, opened up other possibilities for him, his relationship with himself, his future, past and the wind. I feel these ways of knowing are often too easily silenced, trivialized or disconnected from our immediate awareness.

Another man's connection to the land brought him back to a sense of responsibility and accountability. His sense of responsibility and accountability in relation to his acts of violence seemed to be understood far more quickly in exploring his experience of planting seed at beginning of the farming season. This man came in to see me after a number of incidents of violence in a bar and with his ex-partner. These incidents had him reevaluating what he was about. He was not OK with his actions. They surprised and troubled him. I began a statement of position map with him exploring the impact of his actions. When I asked what his questioning of his choices spoke to what was more important to him, stories came out about what he really valued in relationships with women, with friends and people in general.

I knew from earlier conversations that he grew up on a farm and was intending to go back into farming himself. As a result, I also asked what his relationship to the land taught him about the values he spoke of. He paused and carefully described the process of planting a seed in the soil. For him, this illustrated perfectly a sense of responsibility and accountability, of care and compassion in relation to the future. That story brought him back to a richer understanding of how deeply he held those beliefs. Previous conversations had explored the impact of guilt and shame but this conversation seemed to move him beyond an internalized sense of responsibility to an understanding of responsibility to something more that he wanted and needed to translate in to all his relationships.

He spoke of re-focusing his intentions and had a more motivated sense of living the understandings he was brought back to. This challenged notions of what it meant to be a man which influenced his action in the bar scene and in past intimate relationships. He spoke of wishing to be the man responsible and accountable for his actions as he knew himself to be while planting seed in the hope of a crop. For him this eco-story connection, playing a relational role with the land, is what made that happen.

As I reflect back on this conversation, I think I only scratched the surface, in asking questions about his relationship to the land. I could have explored and thickened that understanding by asking questions about his knowledge of how the relationships within the Earth help create the food he helped produce, the interdependent connections between him and the soil, the richness and care needed to protect all life so it could live. The Earth mattered to this man and by doing therapy as if the Earth mattered would have allowed us to further cultivate a seed planted long ago in this man by his relationship with the land.

Collective Eco-Narrative Practices

My project for the yearlong international training program in narrative therapy and community work is an example of the potential of eco-narrative practices on a community level. It integrated the narrative practices of the collective narrative timeline and maps of history and the Tree of Life (Denborough, 2008) with ideas informing eco-narrative practices. I designed a community workshop for the project entitled "Re-storying our Relationship with the Earth: Responding to Troubled Times with Renewed Active Hope". I presented it on two separate occasions to enable a sharing of stories between participants. I had originally intended designing a collective document writing format but changed to the Tree of Life in the end because I felt it

could be a better vehicle to explore ecocentric concepts in this context and with the participants I anticipated. I invited anyone doing environmental and social justice work who had experienced discouragement in the face of "troubled times'" impact on the Earth. The purpose of the workshop was to explore the impact of "troubled times" on people and the Earth and the responses that can re-invigorate active hope on an individual and community level.

My premise for the workshop was that often "troubled times" can cause people to lose hope for social and environmental justice. It can isolate people from community, and it can disconnect us from that which sustains us all in the first place, the Earth. My hope was that this workshop would provide an opportunity to re-connect with and share people's relationship to important values, community and the Earth. Through the development and sharing of stories that have helped people through troubled times, of the skills, knowledges, values, and community which includes the Earth, it was hoped that personal and community agency could be re-engaged for bringing about social and environmental change. Although there was a low turnout, based on the stories and responses of the participants involved, I think it was successful in meeting this hope.

The Framework

The collective narrative time line and maps of history and The Tree of Life was the main framework for the workshop but I also integrated another map framework which underpinned the day from an ecocentric perspective.

Borrowing from Joanna Macy's work, an eco-philosopher and environmental activist, I drew on a spiral map framework she uses in her community work called "The Work that Reconnects" (Macy, 1998, 2012). The spiral map of the "work that reconnects" is like a

narrative statement of position map (White, 2007). It begins with "Coming from gratitude", moves to "Honouring our pain for the world", to "Seeing with new eyes" and finally to a "Going forth". "Coming from gratitude" is like "standing together on a riverbank" (Kaseke, Sipelile, 2010) or identifying the value and ethics base from which to stand before looking at the effects of a problem (Jenkins, 1990). "Honouring our pain for the world" is an exploring and acknowledging the effects of a problem. "Seeing with new eyes" is the paradigm shift to ecocentric thinking and "Going forth" is imagining and planning next steps with such a new story; a living into alternative stories in line with ones values and ecocentric worldview.

The Details

I began the workshop with an adapted version of a blessing by Mary Rogers from the book *Earth Prayers* (1991) to set a tone of interconnectedness to the Earth and honour that relationship (Roberts and Amidon, pp. 172-173).

Upon welcoming people we collectively created guidelines for the day that would make a safe, comfortable, sharing, learning environment. We did a brief name sharing exercise that involved tossing an Earth juggling ball to each person who was asked to introduce themselves. If there were more participants I had in mind a juggling pattern exercise that represented interconnectedness and cooperation. Each person shared their name, a favorite place in nature and/or one where they felt most comfortable and one hope for the day.

After this I introduced the agenda for the day briefly describing a bit of my own journey that brought me to offering this workshop. I gave a brief explanation of narrative therapy and the relevance of stories in its practices. I gave examples of how story could also be helpful in understanding "troubled times" and a different relation with Earth as a way of responding with "active" hope (Macy and Johnstone, 2012).

With the use of a short humourous animated video by Jason Ables (2006) about interconnectedness as told from the perspective of a wombat, I began to introduce ecocentric concepts and their potential relevance in getting through "troubled times". (http://www.global-mindshift.org/discover/viewMeme.asp?memeid=239).

I expanded on these ideas by reading the quote from Thomas Berry that opens this paper. I then introduced some of Joanna Macy's thinking and use of story in understanding "troubled times". The purpose in all of this was to introduce new ideas to consider that may have resonance with participants own eco-stories, experience and analysis of "troubled times". It began a process of naming and externalizing dominant stories that contribute to disconnection and of honouring their own responses to these as well.

In her books *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* and *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*, Macy describes three influential grand narratives, all happening at the same time:

- Business as Usual (Economic growth essential for prosperity)
- The Great Unraveling (the disasters from "Business as Usual")
- The Great Turning (Emergence of new and creative human responses; central plot is finding and offering our gift of Active Hope) Incorporates three dimensions:
    - Holding Actions (e.g. campaigns in defense of life on Earth)
    - Life-Sustaining Systems and Practices (e.g. developing new economic and social structures; permaculture)
    - Shift in Consciousness (e.g. change in our perception, thinking, and values)

  (Macy and Johnston, 2012, pp. 13-33)

To illustrate these ideas further I played short video excerpts from the poet, activist and writer Drew Dellinger (Planetize the Movement: A New Cosmology Story: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQg4EwXZnss&feature=related) and the first three minutes and thirty seconds of "Love Letter to the Milky way" celebrations: (http://drewdellinger.org/pages/video).

In each of these he emphasizes the power of story and the importance of creating new stories that re-connect us. "We need to build a movement that connects ecology, social justice and cosmology using the power of dream, the power of story, the power of art and the power of action . . . Part of what I think we need to do to link ecology, and social justice and cosmology is recognize that the power of story is operating in all these areas." (Dellinger, 2011, http://drewdellinger.org/pages/video).

Collective Narrative Timeline and Maps of History

After a break we continued sharing some of our own eco-stories through the collective narrative timeline and maps of history using the following questions which integrated ecocentric concepts into the exercise. I drew a flowing river to represent the timeline.

- What has drawn you to take part in a re-storying or re-connecting your relationship with the Earth to Respond to Troubled Times with Renewed Active Hope? This might relate to a wish, an obligation, commitment, hope, learning, value and a connection to the Earth.
- What is the history of this wish, commitment, hope, learning, value, a connection to the Earth?
- Where did you learn, experience or develop this (what place)?
- Was/is there a particular element, place or animal that reminds you, inspires you, reconnects you with this knowing?
- Who did you learn it from?
- Who did you learn it with?
- Or was there a knowing, a sense or understanding of this other than through people (in nature, an Ah Ha moment or the like)?
  (reference)

Although most participants grew up on the prairies, it was striking how many shared stories of the significance of their connection to trees. People remarked on how important it was to hear others' stories as well. Certain writers, books and documentaries were common and important to many despite the age differences among participants. Some noted the power of certain political movements as influential to their commitments while others noted certain trainings such as those

within permaculture as life changing. "I found myself thinking about things I hadn't thought about for a long time and put them together in a different way.", noted one participant after the workshop.

In the first workshop, I explained Macy's spiral map and used the following video, "Gratitude" by Louie Schwartzberg (2011) to begin at the starting point of gratitude. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nj2ofrX7jAk&feature=watch_response)

As a way of moving to the "Honouring our pain" part of the spiral in the first workshop, one participant offered to read a poem she had written of her experience of "troubled times". After others shared their responses to the poem and some of their own experiences we moved forward to "Seeing with new eyes" by beginning the Tree of Life exercise. In the second workshop I did not use this video due to time restraints and explored the concept of gratitude throughout the story tellings through questions, re-tellings, witnessing and honouring of stories.

Due to room booking difficulties for the workshop I was not able to get my preferred location for the entire day, only for the afternoon. So I actually ended up reserving two locations. One was an interior meeting room in the counseling centre which was windowless. This I used in the morning and then we moved across campus after lunch to the second preferred location called the "River Room". This location had huge windows looking out over the South Saskatchewan River and treed river valley nature trails.

This arrangement actually turned out to be very useful. I introduced an ecotherapy sensory exercise asking the participants to notice what they saw, smelled, heard and felt while walking between the two locations. We reflected on the impact and differences between the two locations on the overall experience of the workshop. It became a practical example of disconnect and connection with nature; of how design of structures influences ways of being, feeling and

thinking. The exercise and reflection also drew on permaculture teachings and principles of observation, integration of design of human habitat with natural elements for multiple functions and sustainability. In the afternoon of the second workshop we were able to be outside for the majority of the time as well. Each workshop gave participants break time by the river.

The Tree of Life

In part one of the Tree of Life I set a backdrop for the exercise by exploring the relevance of trees in people's lives. I began with the following quote from the *Permaculture Design Manual* by Bill Mollison (2009), the co-originator of permaculture:

> For me, trees have always been the most penetrating teachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves . . . They struggle with all the forces of their lives for one thing only: To fulfill themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own forms, to represent themselves. Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary, than a beautiful strong tree.
> (Herman Hesse, "Trees", Natural Resources Journal, Spring 1980. As found in Bill Mollison's *Permaculture: A Designers' Manual,* 2009, p. 137.)

I asked participants "What do you know about trees? What have trees taught you?" I continued developing the context of the exercise by exploring a bit more about the significance of trees beyond just a metaphor but as part of larger ecosystems which sustain our very existence and from which we can learn a great deal. I drew more from permaculture teachings on the complexity, diversity and resiliency of trees and forest ecosystems. I used the following videos to highlight these points. The quotes provided reflect the important points in each of the video's messages.

- Fantastic Fungi: The Spirit of Good

  > The task that we face today is to understand the language of nature. . . . The fact that we lack the language skills to communicate with nature does not impune the concept that nature's intelligent. It speaks to our inadequacy of our skill set for communication.

Paul Stamets of Fungi Perfecti (fungi.com) from a film by Louie Schwartzberg of Blacklight films (Movingart.tv)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wzBPSbTGYM

- The Social Network of Forestry / Mother Tree:

  These plants are not really individuals . . . in fact they're interacting with each other trying to help each other survive. . . . That diversity is what really gives the forest resilience. The resilience to withstand the unexpected events. . . . Trees will move some of their legacy to the next generation. (UBC professor Suzanne Simard in a short film by Dan McKinney)
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8SORM4dYG8

Following these clips, I explained the Tree of Life drawing exercise and began a reflection process with meditations and questions which took people into a forest with all its sights, sounds and smells.[6]

The Roots

The meditation I used had people imagine the roots beneath their bodies describing them as where they and their skills, knowledges, values and commitments for social and environmental justice work come from. I asked the following questions:

- Where do your skills, knowledges, values and commitments for social and environmental justice work come from?
- What gives you strength?
- What/who do you return to when you need strength?
- What keeps you steady; people, spirituality; food; music; nature, the Earth?
- Are these skills, knowledges, values and commitments for social and environmental justice work rooted in a family history?
- Who have you've learned the most from? Is this from one person or more than one? Is it from a community? A faith community? A cultural connection? What's the history of these connections?
- What stories come to mind to describe these deep roots?
- Has it been from nature itself? What's your favorite place in nature? What is the history of your relationship with the natural world?
- What have trees and the natural world contributed to your life?
- What have trees and the natural world contributed to the planet?
- What have you?
- Go deeper and wonder about what these roots are connected to. What's in the soil that nourishes these roots? What were the natural patterns, nutrients, skills, knowledges, and

values that informed/connected/related to the roots you are aware of? Just imagine the history beyond a human life span, before a human life span.

The Ground

I continued the meditation introducing the ground as the place representing where their life is at present and asked these questions.

- What are some of the activities that you are engaged in during regular daily life, related to your social and environmental work, values and commitments.
- How do they support you?
- What are their histories that support your values and commitments?
- Who benefits from your involvement, past, present or future?
- Who in your life would be least surprised with what you do now? Why? What do they know about you, have known about you that gives them a sense of pride for what you do?
- What will future generations be able to say as a result of your current work and commitments?
- What would the Earth have to say?
- What ways does nature support you at present? Does it feed you? Give you peace? Does it teach you? What does it remind you of? What does nature contribute to you now? How do you contribute to it?

The Trunk

With the meditation, the participants continued their reflective process on the trunk. It represented the skills they brought to their social and environmental work and commitments.

- What are the skills you do/have/demonstrate in your social and environmental work and commitments or other aspects of your life (i.e. physical acts, skills of caring, kindness, and so on)?
- What are the histories of these skills? How long have you had them? Where do they come from?
- Did you learn these skills from anyone in particular? Recall some stories about these skills and the information can be recorded on the tree.
- Has nature taught these skills?
- Are there special memories of learning these skills that are held precious?
- What stories and/or skills would others tell of them?
- Are they collective skills and abilities; teamwork?
- What are the values or qualities that are important to you or you seek to demonstrate in life?
- What is the history of your relationship with these values or qualities?
- Trace and record them on the trunk in some way.

The Branches

For the branches, participants were asked to reflect on their hopes, dreams and wishes for direction in their life based on their social and environmental skills, knowledges and values.

- What is the history of these hopes, dreams and wishes?
- How are they linked to specific people or elements of nature?
- How long have these hopes and dreams been alive in your life?
- How have you managed to sustain these hopes? How has nature assisted you?
- What are the hopes you may have for others, the community, future generations, the Earth?

The Leaves

With the leaves, participants thought about people important to them, alive or passed on. They could also be special places that still exist or do not. The leaves are an honouring of special relationships and how they can continue to be remembered.

- Why are they special?
- What are some of the lovely times with these people, with these places? What was special?
- Are there particular elements in nature, pets, animals, trees that are important to you?
- What are some of the stories of their significance?
- Would they like to be remembered in these ways?

The Fruits

For the fruit, I had the group think of them as gifts that have been given, but not necessarily material ones. They could be acts of kindness, or care or love from others; from nature, from the Earth. They considered also contributions they had given to the community currently and in the future.

- Why do you think this gift was given?
- What was appreciated about you that would have led them to do this?
- If nature could speak, what would she say?
- What do you think she might have contributed to their lives?

Forest of Life

In this section the intent was to build and acknowledge second stories; skills, abilities, hopes and dreams and the histories of these to establish a different place from which to stand to look at the effects of "troubled times". We reflected on all the trees that were drawn adding the first workshops trees to the second's. Participants shared some of their stories behind their skills, values, hopes and dreams of their commitments to social and environmental justice. I shared some stories from the first workshop's drawings and my own. Questions were asked such as:

- Who else knows about these stories and their meanings?
- If the Earth could speak what would she say of what it means to her?
- What might these trees have in common and some of the differences?

People made connections to some of the videos that spoke to the interconnectedness of forests and what is represented in this Forest of Life for them. Some participants shed tears as they spoke to the significance of remembering they were alone in their struggles and commitments but deeply tied to a community of life, human and non-human. Concepts from permaculture were introduced about pioneering species, time stacking, intentionally designing more abundant and self-sustaining eco-systems, food forests and Forests of Life (Morrow, 2006).

When the storms come

Although time was limited in the first workshop, reflections were offered by participants in the large group as to what happens to and in forests when storms come. In both workshops, but more so in the second when more time was available, lessons were drawn from what forests can teach us about a bigger picture, networks, systems thinking, passing on information, legacy, resources, time and hope. Difficulties and hardships were expressed, effects of troubled times acknowledged and the skills and knowledges participants demonstrated in responding. Questions such as the following were asked:

- Are storms always present?
- Are our lives sometimes free of storms?

- What do we do when the storms have passed?

Closing Ritual

In the final part of the Tree of Life exercise I considered many options from certificates, to writing letters to the future but settled on the following "going forth" questions from Joanna Macy's work (Macy, 1998, pp. 171-172).

- If you were fearless and completely in your power as a part of the web of life, what would you do to care for the Earth?
- What abilities, attributes and skills do you bring to this task?
- What do you need to acquire, learn in order to achieve you task, what resources do you need?
- What obstacles will you put in your way of achieving the task?
- How might you overcome these obstacles you place before yourself?
- Think of a specific amount of time in the future, 12 months or less. What do you need to do in this time to achieve your goal?

Time being a factor in each workshop I structured this exercise in different ways. In the first workshop I broke the group into diads and had them ask each other the questions and read the answers back to each other as well. In the final workshop I read the questions to the group and had them write their answers on their own.

As a closing exercise, each group shared one thing they took with them from the day and a "Going forth" direction they wished to pursue. At the end of the second workshop I concluded with a poem, another blessing of the Earth (Roberts and Amidon, 1991, p. 94).

Conclusions

This has been a long and passionate journey I've embarked on over the last several years trying to integrate my interests in narrative therapy and community practices with others centered on social and environmental justice work. It probably started even further back as I began my own paradigm shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric thinking, all from not knowing

what a pea looked like in the garden. But that's another story. The personal and professional exploration has been most rewarding.

For me the learnings have been many. One that stands out is that introducing eco-narrative practices in individual and collective contexts does have resonance for people and can assist them in "troubled times". These experiences have affirmed hope and possibility for those I've worked with and myself. It has countered negative discourses of "business as usual" that tend to make me dismiss the possibility of going forward with these ideas at times.

This year has allowed me the time to read more, reflect, write, question assumptions and experiment more with eco-narrative practices with individuals and in the community. I have gained confidence in trusting the value of these practices through the responses I've seen from the people with whom I've worked. I have loved the individual work and I get energy from the students on a daily basis.

Through the project, I have learned it can work on a collective level as well. Co-facilitation would have assisted the workshop tremendously countering some of the fear I did experience. I found there were so many things to keep track of with a full day workshop, running a Tree of Life exercise for the first time and trying to expand upon it with new untested ideas. I felt I ran out of time and could have used more for the effects of "troubled times" and Forest of Life sections. I was able to address this better in the second workshop pacing myself and trusting the process more.

I can see myself running the workshop again in similar and different ways. Many who were unable to attend have asked if I'll be holding it again in the fall. I could see myself traveling regionally with such a workshop providing it to other permaculture, social justice, transition movement, environmental and community garden groups. I would like to explore the

questions of how to introduce the ideas to people with little awareness of the impact of disconnect. Participants familiar with permaculture felt the workshop would be a useful compliment to the full two week permaculture design certificate course (PDC). Many PDC graduates are really invigorated after a course but uncertain where best to apply this energy upon returning to their communities. This workshop may prepare them better for that challenge.

I would like to try more collective document writing and circulating the documents among groups, which was my original idea. For example, an exercise I've used in my presentations on these ideas could be expanded. It was adapted from workshop material from "Towards collective and community practices: Narrative ways of linking lives and working with groups and communities", by Cheryl White & David Denborough, Dulwich Centre, presented in Winnipeg, October, 2008. The exercise involves facilitating larger groups to share eco-stories that have gotten them through hard times. In triads they share and document their stories. The stories can be collected, summarized in themes by the facilitators and read back to the whole group. This retelling of the stories anchors the relevance and power of the connections contributing to others ability to get through hard times. The exercise can be expanded to share these documents of people's connection to nature with other communities. These retellings and their meaningful impacts could also lead to many creative forms of action for a more sustainable future, such as collectively planting food forests in their communities.

I would also like to run an eco-narrative depression group in the winter months that would explore not only the disconnect people experience as a result of depression but also the stories of when they have been re-connected in nature and it's impact on their experience of depression. A thread and end goal of the group would be to also reconnect with the Earth through the planning, designing and planting of a permaculture garden on campus in the spring.

The intent would be to physically and practically reconnect them to the Earth and the eco-stories of their lives. This could also lead to the establishment of a permaculture club on campus that could be a teaching tool for the larger campus and community. It could perhaps provide fruit and vegetables on an ongoing basis in the future for the student food bank.

Eco-narrative practices are an attempt to bring the Earth and people's relationship to it into therapeutic conversations on an individual and community level. They are about listening for and bringing out the eco-stories in people's lives that re-connect them to the Earth. My experience has been that they can help people have a different relationship with problems, understanding them within a larger context. Through exploring the stories in people's lives of their connection to the Earth, eco-narrative practices can help them address problems from a more "grounded" position. Eco-narrative practices are also about re-storying our relationship with the Earth. It is my hope that eco-narrative practices can also enable people to be more active agents of personal, social and environmental change.

> The care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope. (Wendell Berry, 2002)

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[1] Ecocentrism, is described in J. E. de Steiguer's (1997) Age of Environmentalism, as ". . . an environmental philosophy which emphasizes an ecological, Earth-centered worldview" (Steiguer, 1997, p. 16). As opposed to anthropocentrism which ". . . holds that any and all human actions are, by definition, anthropocentric (i.e., human-centered)" (p. 17).

Stan Rowe's words though have been pivotal in my own understanding of this paradigm shift to ecocentrism. Rowe states in a 1994 article that:

> The ecocentric argument is grounded in the belief that compared to the undoubted importance of the human part, the whole Ecosphere is even more significant and consequential: more inclusive, more complex, more integrated, more creative, more beautiful, more mysterious, and older than time. The "environment" that anthropocentrism misperceives as materials designed to be used exclusively by humans, to serve the needs of humanity, is in the profoundest sense humanity's source and support: its ingenious, inventive life-giving matrix (Rowe, 1994, pp. 106-107).

[2] Deep ecology is another contemporary environmental philosophy emphasizing that we are a part of the Earth, rather than apart and separate from it (Johnson, 2002). Originally introduced by the Norwegian activist/philosopher Arne Naess, the term "deep ecology" emphasizes the need to "move beyond superficial responses to the social and ecological problems we face." The asking of "deeper questions" about the "why and how" of the way we live, delving into our "deeper beliefs, needs, and values" is similar to where narrative therapy questions can take people. But it does so from an ecocentric perspective asking, "How can I live in a way that is good for me, other people and our planet?" Questions like this may lead people "to make deep changes in the way we live." (http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-eco/johnston.htm)

[3] Ecotherapy and ecopsychology have been and continue to be evolving fields of therapeutic practice over the last few decades. Various writers make distinctions between the two. Howard Clinebell (1996) states in *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth* that "*Ecotherapy* refers to both the healing and the growth that is nurtured by healthy interaction with the earth. . . . Ecotherapy aims at incorporating biophilia into healing and growth practices and thus at utilizing the healing energies of nature." (p. xxi)

Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist (2009) in *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* make a distinction between ecotherapy and ecopsychology. ". . . ecopsychology provides a solid theoretical, cultural, and critical foundation for ecotherapeutic practice." They regard "ecotherapy as applied ecopsychology. As an umbrella term for nature-based methods of physical and psychological healing, *ecotherapy* represents a new form of psychotherapy that acknowledges the vital role of nature and addresses the human-nature relationship." (p. 18)

I personally see eco-narrative practices as distinctively different from both ecotherapy and ecopsychology due to the social constructionist, postmodern and feminist thought that informs narrative practices and the influences from the environmental philosophies of ecocentrism and deep ecology as well as the applied ethical thinking and practice of permaculture.

[4] Permaculture is a design science for sustainable human habit based on natural ecosystems. As defined by Ben Haggard at http://www.permaculture.net/ permaculture:

> . . . is a design system that attempts to reconcile human communities with the ecological imperatives of a living planet. Permaculture design may be used to restore ecosystems, create sustainable human habitats and healthy towns, and promote economic systems that support the care of the Earth. It provides an ethical and holistic foundation for sustainable culture. The principles are derived from three basic ethics: care for the earth; care for people; limit needs and reinvest in the future . . . . Permaculture is a body of knowledge, susceptible to learning and teaching. But it is also a way of organizing knowledge, a connecting system that integrates science, art, politics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and the diverse experiences and resources available in any community.
> (http://www.permaculture.net/about/definitions.html)
> See also: Permaculture 101 by Penny Livingston at
> http://www.globalonenessproject.org/videos/Permaculture_101

[5] "Deep time" is a concept of geological time but is used in the deep ecology work of Joanna Macy (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_time_%28disambiguation%29) to incorporate the awareness of past and future generations and life into our current choices, decisions and actions. "By opening up our experience of time in organic, ecological, and even geological terms and in revitalizing relationship with other species, other eras--we can allow life to continue on Earth." (http://www.joannamacy.net/introduction-to-deep-time.html)

[6] The Tree of Life meditation I used was adapted from a post on the Tree of Life Facebook group page on February 23, 2012, by Kathy Jones from Freeling, South Australia. https://www.facebook.com/groups/269945769703564/permalink/361518017213005/ My Tree of Life questions were adapted from the "The Tree of Life: Responding to vulnerable children" chapter 4 in *Collective Narrative Practice* by David Denborough, 2008, and expanded upon from an ecocentric perspective.

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