

NOTES FROM THE FIELD:

The Process of Engaging

by

Roselle P. O'Brien

Autumn in New England is awakening. Uppermost leaves are fading to gold, too soon for the umber and scarlet. Their glory will peak come October, a final gift before the blanketing hush of snow. I am aware, more than ever, of the interplay between self and world. I worry about my clients who are living with environmental illnesses, knowing the temperatures will drop as we turn away from summer and the beach to focus on fall and the harvest. Some sleep in cars, unable to find shelter they can tolerate. Others suffer with housing in apartments, homes, and buildings whose internal and external materials—the walls, flooring, carpets, shared areas, heating systems—bring about endless reactions involving all organ systems that leave them physically, cognitively, and emotionally compromised, often totally disabled. They have nowhere else to go.

I work with individuals who have chronic environmental illnesses: Mast Cell Activation Syndrome (MCAS), Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), Mastocytosis, mast cell and mast cell activation related disorders. These are people who, because of their chronic illness and the severity of their symptoms and reactions, are not always able to manage traditional face-to-face therapy. Our culture of healing often limits and can be itself a barrier to accessing care. I offer options, therapy alternatives: telephone, email, virtual, instant messaging, as well as face-to-face and combinations.

The process of engaging in Creative Arts Therapy through these alternative routes of access constantly challenges me to adapt my

thinking and my approach, to not only channel them through these different avenues that influence the form, flavor, and essence of the therapy, but also to reinterpret my personal understanding of systems in relation to our natural environment. This shift of insight brought into the therapy feeds our understanding of self in relation to a world that holds and sustains us. We are creatures of relationship, and this one most significant relationship of self with environment, more frequently than not, is overlooked and under-explored.

Man's impact on the environment, as well as our relationship with the environment, is a convoluted exchange of need and dominion. People who live with environmental illnesses can feel as if the world has turned on them. They struggle under the weight of multiple layers of abandonment, rejection, and loss of hope.

Examining life systems through the lens of complexity science gives rise to the question: how can we make any predictions about behavior if we ignore the essential initial condition of the natural environment within which we co-exist? Complexity science teaches us that life systems are highly intricate and ever-changing, and that "any ignorance of the initial conditions of a life system make any predictions impossible," (Luhman & Boje, 2001). Life systems impact and interact with each other in myriad ways, and each exchange creates, influences, and destroys. These interactions that deconstruct and reconstruct are conversations. The study of discourse—of conversations—and how we make meaning through language is profoundly influential in understanding what it means to reach and connect, especially through the creative arts.

Words, images, scents, the experience of the tactile, movement and motion, the sound within a sound. The day-to-day of human life, of being alive, is an interplay of ecosystems at the micro and macro levels. Individuals with environmental illnesses have internal, physical ecosystems that have been damaged and broken. Their ability to participate in all levels of exchange has

become profoundly limited and impaired. Expanding our understanding of the ingredients of discourse, the ways through which we communicate, and the languages of the disciplines enables us as artists, clinicians, and practitioners to move through murky waters to places of contact and connection.

The intersection of ecopsychology and Creative Arts Therapy provides a meeting ground and an opportunity to directly consider the role of the natural environment in our lives, our illnesses, and in healing. We are part of a culture that emphasizes a construct within which humans exist as independent and self-contained, separate from the natural environment, and impervious to the consequences of their behaviors. Sarah A. Conn, PhD, in the book *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, writes, "Because we experience the self as separate from the Earth, we feel either overwhelmed by or removed from what we learn about environmental deterioration; we become helpless or indifferent in the face of it, and unable to respond except with numbness and denial," (Roszak et al, 1995). This numbness and denial is carried over into our responses to the people who are living with the effects of environmental deterioration and the accompanying illnesses that are the direct consequences of human behaviors.

The American Medical Association continues to deny that environmental illnesses, such as MCS, exist, insisting they are at best mental illnesses. The majority of doctors are not trained to recognize, diagnose, or treat environmental illnesses and mast cell related disorders, leaving individuals without appropriate care or supports. Conn offers in her essay an apt description of the position of mainstream psychology in regard to MCS and environmental illness, "we tend to address personal problems, or sometimes social, economic, or political issues, without much attention to how they are interrelated or affected by the larger context...We have, in short, cut ourselves off from our connection to the Earth so thoroughly in our epistemology and our psychology that even though we are "bleeding at the roots," we

neither understand the problem nor know what we can do about it," (Roszak, et al, 1995).

The work I share with my clients inevitably and fundamentally is about the relationship of self and environment. I consciously offer them doorways to walk through, thresholds to cross, mirrors to which they can turn or turn away. Most poignant is my awareness of companionship. Environmental illnesses are isolating conditions of separation filled with loss and death: the death of dreams, futures, friendships; the loss of a familiar life in the middle of living it; all the ways we measure and value our worth no longer applicable. Avoidance, sadly, is a medical necessity for individuals living with environmental illnesses. Avoidance is a bleak landscape with the fact of chemical injury a seemingly insurmountable obstacle: they must avoid exposure to the chemicals and substances to which they react—on themselves, on others, and in the environment. Every day I am challenged to reach and connect with individuals who, because of their chronic illness, must avoid people, places, and contact.

The creative arts are places and avenues that reach beyond the imposed limitations of chronic illness to connect, sustain, and nurture. Through the process of engaging in Creative Arts Therapy, we are able to hold, give, and share in moments of witness. Whether it's music, words, movement, the soft silk of dry plaster on your hands, each individual creates an installation and invites others to join them, to see through their eyes, to feel and know. Expanding our awareness, our invitation, to include our relationship with the natural environment allows us to acknowledge the positive aspects of our relationship with the earth, our need for sustenance and comfort, the solace we find in nature, while making real the burden of our behaviors. The power of the arts to heal is tremendous. Through music, the natural environment, writing, drama, the visual arts, we are able to own and feel the depths of pain and loss, outrage, separation, the joy of the morning, the hope for tomorrow. The creative arts in therapy gives voice to the unutterable, helps us embrace what we

cannot change and through its touch shows us everything we can, everything we are.

Citations:

Roszak, T., Gomes, M. and A. Kanner (1995) *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth Healing the Mind*. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco. Print.

Luhman, J. and D. Boje, "What is Complexity Science? A Possible Answer from Narrative Research," *Emergence* 3-1, 05/31/2001, p158-168. Print.