



How green is my valley — and mind

Ecotherapy and the greening of psychology

By Jeffrey G. Borchers and G. A. Bradshaw

At Serenity Park, veterans and parrots establish a therapeutic alliance.

When only a few months old, Joey was taken from his birth parents. For the next 16 years, he was moved from house to house, physically abused and isolated in the dark for days on end. Today, in a stable home, his overall health has improved, but he will suddenly fly into a rage, scream and frantically tear at his chest until it bleeds. Because various therapeutic approaches have failed, psychopharmaceuticals are now prescribed.

Matty also grew up in a physically abusive home. Like his father, he joined the military and subsequently made a seven-month tour on the *USS Eisenhower*. Upon returning to civilian life, he developed a drug and alcohol dependence and was jailed for assault. He enrolled in a rehabilitation program for veterans but continued to have aggressive outbursts and depression and was unable to establish positive relationships. He was diagnosed with 70 percent disability for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and prescribed a regimen of nine psychopharmaceutical agents.

Two case studies with similar etiologies and therapeutic challenges. Two individuals struggling with recovery from violence. Little did they know they would end up together and change each other's lives. As Matty recounts, "Joey didn't just change my life, he saved my life." By walking into each other's worlds, the two have embarked on a whole new journey together. Or, to be more precise, Matty walked into Joey's life; Joey flew into Matty's.

Yes, "flew" is right. Joey is an 18-year-old parrot and Matty a 35-year-old man.

They are part of a new program that partners veterans and birds to help each other transition from uncertain, violent pasts to futures with hope and meaning. There is more here than meets the eye, however. This isn't just a new therapeutic fad. Joey and Matty are part of a radical new paradigm that is taking hold in counseling.

The brainchild of clinical psychologist Lorin Lindner, director of the Association for Parrot C.A.R.E., the parrot-veteran program is located at the Serenity Park Sanctuary on the grounds of the Greater Los Angeles Veterans Administration Hospital. More than 50 parrots like Joey have been rescued and brought to the sanctuary. They tend to and are tended by military veterans who are also in need of a home and quality care. Administrators describe the program as unconventional but also say that it works. After two months, Matty was no longer taking medications. Instead, he was prescribed "parrot therapy." Joey also experienced relief from symptoms of PTSD, a condition that is now being identified in many animal species.

Serenity Park is an example of the greening of psychotherapy — known as ecotherapy — that is bringing counselors and their clients back to nature.

Bringing "eco" back into the equation

Ecotherapy is based on principles of ecopsychology, the theory that human mental health and well-being are connected to the quality of our relationships with nature. Despite its novelty today, "going green" for cures has a long heritage. Ecotherapy's origins are found in the

traditions of American Indian and other indigenous peoples, where nature is central. Even Erik Erickson, Sigmund Freud's own student, sent his patients to alpine landscapes as part of their treatment. In what may be the first formal example of American ecotherapy, the Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth was established in 1886 in Canaan, N.Y., to serve troubled children and their families. In those years, residents of mental institutions worked in the gardens to provide food while simultaneously benefiting from being close with nature. Eventually, however, nature's place in psyche and society was pushed aside by urbanization. Still, there are places where nature never left therapy.

Ecotherapy programs are well established in many parts of Europe. Holland boasts more than 500 "care farms" — places where clinicians send their clients to agricultural settings as part of their prescribed therapy. In the United Kingdom, the National Care Farming Initiative facilitates collaboration among scores of care farms that provide nature-oriented approaches to treat a variety of mental conditions. But ecotherapy entails more than recreating in nature. It is grounded in the same principles as other psychotherapies but with some significant distinctions.

A decade or more ago, the union of "eco" and psyche remained largely in the realm of philosophy with little theory connecting it with extant psychology and scant attention paid to formal clinical applications. Now a literature has coalesced resonant with key principles of modern psychotherapy. Joey and Matty's story provides a vivid example of how core concepts of attachment theory from conventional psychology also operate in ecotherapy.

Attachment theory says relationships, along with genes, shape how we think, feel and act. Evolutionary psychology includes our early interactions with nature as part of this relational hard-wiring, or what biologist E.O. Wilson terms *biophilia*. Knowing how to relate with the ecological surround was essential. Our closest genetic relative, the chimpanzee, and our not-so-distant predecessors had to rely on their knowledge of flora and fauna in the ancestral "hood" to survive. However, modern life involves very few encounters with nature. Such acquired indifference comes with a price.

Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* asserts that children suffer from widespread "nature deficit disorder" — a profound alienation from nature — and blames lifestyles that take us far away from the restorative rhythms of forest and stream. Ecotherapist Linda Buzzell, founder of the International Association for Ecotherapy and coeditor of *Ecotherapy*, concurs: "Many current epidemic mental health afflictions such as anxiety, depression and family dysfunction may be directly attributable to unhealthy and unnatural conditions of modern industrial society and not merely the result of chemical imbalance or childhood trauma." Ecotherapy's call to reawaken evolutionary inclinations to bond with creatures great and small provides a "powerful healing methodology" and explains why Joey and Matty's paired treatment has proved so successful. But there is another reason.

Of common minds

For decades, neuroscience has known that brain structures and mechanisms governing affect, empathy, judgment, memory, culture and cognition are

found across species. Now neuroimaging confirms theory and observation — all vertebrates, including animals as diverse as dolphins, cats, chimpanzees and parrots, share socio-affective patterns and homologous neural networks responsible for psychological disorders and suffering. This means that Joey and Matty share a common psychobiology and a mutual vulnerability to stress. In other words, trauma affects both man and parrot.

Trauma diagnosis is unsurprisingly similar across species. PTSD has been diagnosed in free-ranging African elephants that, like their human compatriots, suffer from the wages of war and genocide. The pit bulls recovered in the infamous Michael Vick case that were severely abused and forced to fight exhibit symptoms akin to soldiers in recovery from battle. Chimpanzees recovering from brutal lives as biomedical subjects face the profound task described by psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl as "meaning making." What they and Joey the parrot have experienced — social isolation, shock trauma, prolonged incarceration — is analogous to what human political prisoners endure. Not surprisingly, both parrots and people have been diagnosed with what traumatologist Judith Herman calls "Complex PTSD."

What holds for symptoms, holds for treatment. Parrot therapy conforms to what we know about psychotherapeutic approaches used to facilitate trauma recovery. For example, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay notes that in addition to contending with adaptations acquired to survive battles that carry over into civilian life, many veterans must deal with the loss of their capacity for social trust. Parrot-veteran therapy provides the medium for rebuilding this capacity in both species.



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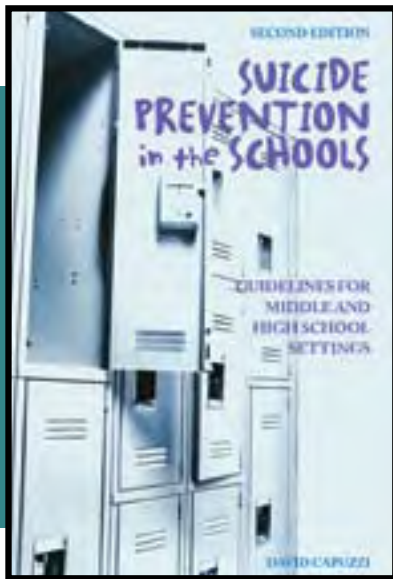
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As Matty finds out what makes Joey tick — what Joey likes to eat, what he likes to do, how he expresses himself when he is happy, scared or aggressive — and, in parallel, as Joey finds out who Matty is, the two are establishing a therapeutic alliance. Bit by bit, each learns how to modulate his own behavior through the processes of feeding, communicating and grooming to match his partner. “You have to be real with a parrot,” Matty says. “And when you aren’t, the feedback is immediate. They can pick up every little emotion and feeling. Being with Joey, I had to be real. I had to be honest. And I could do it because I trusted him. I knew that no matter what, he would always be there to always try and be my friend.” Joey offers unconditional, a quality often sought but, sadly, not so easily found in the company of humans.

Similar to a human therapist, Joey offers Matty an opportunity to try out new ways of relating in “session.” The results are transformative. “After spending time with Joey, and getting to understand what he’s feeling, I became a completely different person,” Matty told his human therapist. “I changed the way I was with people and how I interacted with them. Now, instead of seeing someone as an immediate threat, I try and see who that person really is and why they are doing and saying what they do. I am a lot more open to other people.”

Nature as social facilitator is a theme encountered in other ecotherapeutic settings. Numerous programs include wilderness or adventure therapies as core interventions. Horticultural therapy’s (HT) long history stems directly from the institutional farms of the 19th and 20th centuries. As practiced at a retirement facility near Portland, Ore., HT helps revitalize human-to-human bonds among elderly residents while it sharpens cognitive skills. “Something as simple as planting seeds and picking flowers can reap the most amazing bounties,” says Melissa Richmond, the facility’s HT specialist. “Gardening simply builds community.”

Going green not always rosy

Psychology’s greening raises some unique ethical challenges involving the natural world. Lori Marino, a neuroscientist at Emory University, has extensively researched dolphin-assisted therapy

(DAT), part of the broader project of animal-assisted therapies (AAT) in which animals serve as therapeutic mediums. Marino and others warn that such programs are far from benign. "These programs not only constitute an increasing threat to wild dolphins who are often captured for these programs, but there is no solid evidence that DAT is effective as advertised," she says.

Complications can develop when facilitators of animal therapy aren't thoroughly educated in their responsibilities to care for their animal therapists. Evidence indicates that animal therapists are, like human therapists, vulnerable to compassion fatigue and other hazards of the trade. Because animals do not sign consent forms, AAT can turn into exploitation or even abuse. This has happened in the DAT industry as well as many other AAT programs that use horses, elephants, dogs, cats and others.

The parrot-veteran program differs from most AAT settings because its first and primary goal is to support animal well-being. Human healing and transformation are not ignored, but they take place in the process of being in service to animals. Eileen McCarthy, director and founder of the Midwest Avian Adoption & Rescue Services, has developed what is essentially an emerging parrot counseling center, where volunteers, trained in principles of trauma recovery, work in service for the feathered residents.

A kinder, gentler green world

Ethical concern for nature's well-being lies at the core of ecotherapy, but it also reflects broader social forces of which the new green awareness is a part. This is perhaps best illustrated by one of the oldest ecopsychological institutions, The Animas Institute in Durango, Colo., founded by Bill Plotkin. The organization's teaching is "nature-based soul-initiation, whose central goal is the descent to soul for the purpose of maturing or deepening the ego, rather than healing it." Echoing Louv, Plotkin says, "My clients' discontents are often rooted in an unmet longing for wildness, mystery and a meaningful engagement" — an engagement that seeks to embrace "radical cultural change."

As an agent of cultural change, ecopsychology extends therapy beyond the personal to the deeper "whys" and "hows" of



Horticultural therapy helps retirement facility residents strengthen social bonds and cognitive skills.

existence, thereby embodying an implicit critique. Craig Chalquist, ecopsychologist and coeditor with Buzzell, argues that clients are tackling questions "core to postmodern survival such as 'What does it mean that I live in the middle of the greatest environmental crisis in history? What can I do about it?'" According to Chalquist, ecopsychology offers a way to "heal the cultural split between self and world that underlies the environmental crisis ... and bring psychology into the environmental crisis discussion, diagnose the crisis and offer sustainable alternatives."

Obviously, there is more than meets the eye when "eco" is added to psychology, with much still to be explored and studied with caution. But with reports on global warming and the ever-increasing list of species extinctions, it is clear that the welfare of nature and human psyche are interdependent. Species reconciliation is long overdue and the need for healing even more urgent. A 2007 Department of Veterans Affairs survey conservatively estimated that nearly 14,000 veterans in the Greater Los Angeles area were homeless. Nationwide, the National Alliance to End Homelessness collated figures showing that between 23 percent and 40 percent of homeless adults are veterans. And as Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans return, numbers are expected to rise significantly. As for parrots, there is a nearly \$1 billion industry that continues to drain wild populations, pushing the demand for bird rescue and sanctuary.

In the words of Buzzell, ecotherapy emerges as "the reinvention of psychotherapy as if nature mattered." Clearly, a minding of things green brings a green-

ing of minds. Nature and human nature are indelibly linked in a single web of life that is as much mental as physical. The greening of psychology represents a radically different perspective on healing humans and other animals. Counselors everywhere are challenged to become part of this larger project and explore new methods of diagnosis and treatment that include healing of the natural world from which we have become so estranged, thus embarking on the creation of a kinder, gentler green world. ♦

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