

BOOK REVIEW

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Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World by Bill Plotkin, New World Library, Novato CA, 2008, 517 (galley proof) pages.

EGOCENTRIC VERSUS ECOCENTRIC: THERAPY BEYOND THE OFFICE

IT APPEARS THAT BILL PLOTKIN was a conventionally trained psychologist who practiced psychotherapy and conducted research in a fairly conventional manner until 1980. Then he began leading wilderness retreats to deepen and extend his work. Over the next 25 years he experienced profound transformations in himself and in those with whom he was working. *Nature and the Human Soul* is his attempt to conceptualize and record what he has learned from these experiences,¹ with the hope that it might help save humanity and the earth. Plotkin describes his book as “my contribution to the global effort to create a viable human-Earth partnership.” He makes a compelling case that the earth and all its inhabitants are in great peril, which is easy to do, and that what he has learned might help us avert planetary disaster, which is a bit more difficult. Interestingly, as I read this book, my growing optimism that we might yet be able to save ourselves allowed me to lower some of my defenses against knowing how dire things are. Basically Plotkin believes we are in very dire straits because of a nearly universal developmental failure in humans. Genocide, perpetual warfare, ecological devastation, starvation, poverty and the like will simply get worse unless more of us are able to truly mature.

The bulk of *Nature and the Human Soul* is devoted to a model its author has devised (or perhaps divined) of human development. The primary name of this model is the Wheel of Life, but it is also called the Soulcentric Developmental Wheel and the Ecocentric Developmental Wheel and it applies to individuals as well as to the cultures in which individuals are embedded. Although the model is primarily a map or narrative of optimal individual development, it also has additional facets: a set of guidelines for individual psychological healing or “wholing,” a design tool for creating healthy human communities and life-sustaining societies, a “deep cultural therapy” which is basically a way to heal and transform existing human cultures, and a portrait of the emerging stage of human evolution. No one could accuse the author of narrowness of vision.

Plotkin informs us early in the book that his model is based on three premises. The first premise, already suggested above, is that “a more mature human society requires more mature human individuals.” His second premise is that “nature (including our own deeper nature or ‘soul’) has always provided and still provides

1. It is also clear from his references that he has read widely in psychology, mythology, ecophilosophy, anthropology, mysticism, religion, spirituality, and ethnology.

the best template for human maturation.” This premise is derived primarily from his observations of himself and others as he has led people on intensive immersions in wilderness, usually for eight to fourteen days. Plotkin’s observations also serve as the basis for his third premise: “...that every human being has a unique and mystical relationship with the wild world, and that the conscious discovery and cultivation of that relationship is at the core of true adulthood.” Plotkin asserts that the hallmark of this true adulthood is the knowing and living of one’s purpose, or “sacred calling,” as it has been revealed through mystical affiliation with nature.

The discovery and living of one’s sacred calling, something which Plotkin believes is possible for every human being, take place in the last five stages of the eight in the model. Unfortunately, most of us are suffering from an arrested development that leaves us stuck in stage 3, in a condition he calls “patho-adolescence.” Beyond the more general motive given above for writing the book, Plotkin tells us that his “foremost goal” is “to support more people in reaching stage 5,” with the hope that they will be able to nurture and guide others in such development while themselves maturing through stages 6 through 8 and “to contribute to the creation of healthier societies.” According to Plotkin, it is the alienation from nature during the last five to ten thousand years of Western Civilization, and especially since the Industrial Revolution, that has caused widespread arrested development. The remedy lies in reconnecting with nature and, thereby, with our sacred calling.

An interesting difference between Plotkin’s view, and that of many other currently popular providers of wilderness retreat or vision quest experiences, is that Plotkin regards those wilderness experiences as relatively insignificant in and of themselves. Although they are rites of passage for marking the transition among the eight developmental stages in the model, he gives them very little credit for causing such transitions. Instead, successful transitions are seen almost entirely as the result of the day-to-day work on the developmental tasks within one’s current stage, in conjunction with “the unpredictable, mystical intervention of the Mystery.” Climbing a mountain and crying out in prayer for a vision while fasting for several days in a wilderness area inhabited by large carnivores and venomous reptiles² is often seen as powerful spiritual work and a catalyst to one’s spiritual development, but Plotkin would argue it is more of an opportunity to see if one has already done the developmental work in the months or years before such questing for a vision.

2. I find myself concerned about the tendency to attribute greater significance to visionary experiences which occur under circumstances, including climactic, which could be life-threatening. Sometimes it is assumed that surviving under such circumstances is proof of the vision quest leader’s ability to negotiate shamanically with other species or divine forces for the safety of the human quester, or of the quester’s own ability in this domain. Being willing to take physical risks is also sometimes assumed to demonstrate the quester’s commitment or sincerity in the quest, and to therefore win the favor of the Sacred Mystery in the form of survival or a powerful vision. I have no way of knowing how true any of these assumptions may be, but I am wary of them in the same way I became wary of the assumption that joining the Marines would really make me a man.

While reading *Nature and the Human Soul* I was spending time with my friend, Paul Genova. His skepticism was a good counterpoint to my enthusiasm about the prospect that this book could save the world. Discussions of movies, current events, and other books often resulted in my exclaiming: "THAT'S what Plotkin is talking about!" or "THAT'S where Plotkin's model applies!" In one of these discussions we came across our shared history of attending college in the sixties and early seventies, when we and many of our peers were on fire with passion about ending the war in Vietnam and more generally changing American society for the better. Paul noted how dismayed he was at how many such student revolutionaries, when graduation came, simply got haircuts and moved on to medical school, law school, graduate school, or corporate jobs. As I think of this situation in terms of Plotkin's model, it appears that many of us got a taste of a soulcentric life, one that is animated by a deep sense of purpose, but that we were not able to sustain and integrate that into our ongoing life's work. It is interesting to speculate that the back-to-the-land movement of that same era may have reflected their intuitive sense of the need to make more direct contact with nature as a way of completing certain developmental tasks that require such contact. THAT'S what Plotkin is talking about!

It is difficult to compare *Nature and the Human Soul* to the work of other theorists other than the more familiar theories of human development, but those differ substantially from Plotkin in their basic assumptions about human nature. One theorist who does come to mind is Clare Graves, whose work is presented in the book *Spiral Dynamics* by Don Beck and Chris Cowan. It is a complex model of development which, like Plotkin's, applies both to individuals and cultures. Another relevant theorist is William Taegel, who presents his concepts in his book *Natural Mystics*. His life course as a psychotherapist who moved out of the consulting room to a nature-based approach parallels Plotkin's own.

Of course one must ask the question of how relevant *Nature and the Human Soul* is to the psychotherapist who is still working exclusively in the consulting room, and there are several ways that Plotkin's ideas apply. First there is his assertion that the developmental tasks of any given stage are never complete, so that going back to earlier stages to do such work is always worth considering. This type of historical dimension is quite consistent with the way many psychotherapists already work. Plotkin's work also has implications about the ongoing growth and development of the effective psychotherapist. As the emphasis in Zen in psychotherapy has shifted—from getting the client to meditate, to having the therapist's own meditation practice enrich the therapy and increase the availability of the therapist—so perhaps it would be with nature-based development of the therapist along the lines of Plotkin's model.

Plotkin's formulation also moves one from a pathological model to a more developmental one, which is a positive feature as far as I am concerned. There is a sense that having a grasp of Plotkin's developmental model may help a therapist formulate the developmental needs of the client and the best response to them and, I believe, Plotkin's model implies that those in later stages can be particularly

useful to those in slightly earlier stages. Imagine a growing adolescent who has only one piece of clothing—a full body garment that gets tighter and tighter. Eventually the adolescent's movements would be restricted and distorted by such a garment, perhaps leading the parents to consult an orthopedic surgeon about this apparent physical pathology when the fact is that there was simply something arresting normal development. Therapists with an existential frame of reference will likely find this shift from a pathological model to a developmental model much easier than will those accustomed to a more traditional cognitive or psychodynamic model.

Finally, there is one possible connection between the model presented in *Nature and the Human Soul* and the consulting room that particularly interests me. I have been concerned for some time about the tendency for many nature-based retreat or vision quest leaders to operate on the basis of one-time gatherings of participants who have no history or future with each other. Such nature-based work is certainly more powerful when it is done within the context of an ongoing group of people who remain in regular contact for extended periods of time in between retreat or vision quest events, much like more traditional tribal practices as well as more modern religious congregations. I can envision office-based psychotherapy groups as places where the ongoing day-to-day work on the stages of development presented by Plotkin could include the integration of experiences that individual members might have in nature retreats. This would seem possible even if the therapy group leaders were not the ones leading the nature retreats, although Bill Plotkin's and William Taegel's experiences also caution us that the call of the wild may pull the adventurous therapist outside the office too.

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