Bridging Spirituality/Religiousness and Ecotherapy: Four Psychospiritual Themes to Guide Conceptualization and Practice

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Abstract

Advances in the ecopsychology literature have yielded an increasing plurality of ecotherapy orientations. Simultaneously, clients' religious and spiritual worldviews are becoming more diverse. Ecopsychology and Ecotherapy, however, carry a common set of assumptions consistent with earth-based spirituality and religiousness (EBSR). Though theoretically congruent this may be problematic; the worldview most common to American culture and clients—Christianity, and specifically Christian dualism—is understood and practiced in ways at odds with the holistic and ecocentric worldview of ecotherapy. Level One ecotherapy practices may not overtly cause dissonance for clients of all religious and spiritual (R/S) persuasions, but how can ecotherapists make the riches of a Level Two eco-spiritual worldview available without imposing values? Differentiating Level One from Level Two ecotherapy is a foundational step, but more work is still needed to align ecotherapy with many clients' worldviews. This paper applies parts of the Ways Paradigm framework—the four psychospiritual themes of self, suffering, change, and flourishing—to conceptualize and bridge Level Two ecospiritual insights with a broader range of R/S traditions. Case applications are provided.

Keywords: ecotherapy, spirituality, religion, conceptualization

A Complex Relationship with Spirituality and Religion

Ecotherapy and its parent, ecopsychology, have a complex history and relationship with R/S. Early ecopsychology was replete with spiritual concepts and language (Wiggins et al., 2014), but they are less central in recent literature (E.g.-Jordan & Hinds, 2016). Wisdom traditions are occasionally included (See Charles & Cajete, 2020, p. 65-70), but pioneers in the field viewed "animistic or sacred experience of nature" (Snell et al., 2011, p. 106) as indispensable to awakening the wisdom buried in the ecological unconscious (See Roszak et al., 1995; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). Moreover, it is an ecotherapy axiom that "an ineffable sense of the sacredness of nature within ourselves and our surroundings is a key factor in both mental health and the...changing sense of ecological selfhood" (Buzzell, 2016, p. 79). And yet, "Some may feel that it is not within the purview of ecopsychology or ecotherapy to address the realm of spirituality" (Buzzell, 2016, p. 79). New Age attitudes with supernatural leanings may be perceived as conflicting with empiricism (Wiggins, et al., 2014). Likewise, the seminal "Lynn White thesis" articulated a deeply rooted tension between Christian dualism and ecological sustainability (White, 1967). Ecotherapy may be at home with holistic perceptions of nature as sacred, but it holds other conventional R/S narratives at a distance.

Ecotherapy is Pluralistic, but Implicitly Spiritual

One possible reason for this complex relationship is ecotherapy already carries an implicit spirituality. Across a plurality of ecotherapy theories, such as existential ecotherapy (Softas-Nall & Woody, 2016), person-centered ecotherapy (Tudor, 2013), deep ecology (Metzner, 1999), transpersonal ecotherapy (Besthorn, 2001; Davis, 1998, 2011), Jungian ecotherapy (Plotkin, 2013), and Buddhist ecotherapy (Brazier, 2018), is a shared sense of reverence, belonging, and homecoming within nature's vast web of interdependence. "Ask any

ecotherapist about her or his journey into the field," Rust (2009) explained, "and you will hear stories about love, awe, and beauty, the numinous and the archetypal, about getting to know ourselves through nature and about experiences that take us beyond the confines of the narrow human self" (p. 37). Preliminary research also corroborates the anecdotal, revealing that ecotherapists share a common sense of I-thou connection, believe in the healing capacity of nature, and experience awe and gratitude through nature (King & MacIntrye, 2018). It seems probable many ecotherapists would agree,

> Spirituality is inherently ecological and ecology is inherently spiritual. This spirituality acknowledges that humans belong to a constantly emerging cosmic/spiritual process. Humans emerge from, are dependent upon, and shall return to, an underlying energy or divine presence pervading all reality. Nothing exists outside of this relationship cycle (Besthorn et al., 2010, pp. 27-28).

Ecotherapy may not have codified an explicit set of R/S themes, but it nevertheless carries a common set of implicit assumptions that link qualities of transcendence, connectedness, and interdependence to a sacred relationship with the earth. While this is not problematic in and of itself, the skillful application and tailoring of ecotherapy for clients from diverse R/S worldviews depends on the recognition of the implicit earth-based spirituality and religiousness (EBSR)—a category in need of unpacking— within ecotherapy.

Earth-based Spirituality and Religiousness

When experiences of what is "sacred, transcendent, or beyond the ordinary" (Ammerman, 2007, p. 225) feature the natural world— one connects with a sacred tree or river, feels part of a transcendent cosmic story, or has an extraordinary experience of wonder in the garden— one enters the territory of EBSR. A sacred relationship with nature links to these kinds

of transcendent experiences (Deal & Magyar-Russell, 2018) and permeates the identity, ethics, coping, and practices of those working to end nature's desecration (Deal & O'Grady, 2020). Taylor (2010) describes the umbrella category of EBSR as "perceptions and practices that are characterized by a reverence for nature...feelings of belonging and connection to the earth—of being bound to and dependent upon the earth's living systems" (p. 5). Across the variety of EBSR—animism, pantheism, religious naturalism, deep ecology, and panentheism—are common denominators of ecocentrism; sensory experiences in nature of astonishment, terror, and the sublime; and viewing ecology as a source for spiritual wisdom, self-understanding, and authority (Taylor, 2010).

Building on Buzzell's Levels of Ecotherapy

Because training in how to integrate R/S into therapy is sparse (Vieten et al., 2013) steps to make the implicit EBSR in ecotherapy explicit increases R/S competence. Knowing how to avoid imposing EBSR values (Taylor, 2010), however, is not the same as skillful dialogue with other worldviews.[1] Buzzell's (2016) Level One and Level Two ecotherapy offers a helpful starting place to bring the EBSR views within ecotherapy into conversation with other R/S worldviews. To review, Level One ecotherapy works "to improve human mental and physical health," while Level Two ecotherapy looks beyond simple effects of exposure toward a "Circle of Reciprocal Healing…rooted in the ecologically based, whole systems understanding that there can be no true human health on a sick planet" (Buzzell, 2016, pp. 70-71). Where Level One interventions target awareness and connection within an anthropocentric worldview, ecotherapy at Level Two seeks awakening and transforming to ecocentrism. Inherent to Level Two are processes where earth mingles with ultimate reality and meaning, and therefore constitute EBSR

[1] This includes awareness of the effects historical racial inequities in access to natural spaces (Byrne, 2012) may have R/S preferences of many Persons of Color.

(Buzzell, 2016). Level One interventions, such as walking in nature, connect to any R/S tradition, but the ontological focus of Level Two interventions may evoke dissonance. Ecotherapy, after all, is grounded in a "fundamentally nondual, seamless unity in which both nature and psyche flow as expressions of the same source…with being, with spirit, or the mystery" (Davis as cited in Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009, p. 87). For clients sympathetic to EBSR worldviews, working with Level Two paradigms may feel congruent, but a majority of Americans' worldviews involve dualities (nature v. human; spirit v. matter; transcendence v. immanence; God v. human, etc.) inconsistent with Level Two ecotherapy. Because many clients want to include R/S topics in therapy (Harris et al., 2016) and many ecotherapists embrace EBSR meaning-making, ecotherapy still needs a framework to bridge Level Two EBSR with other R/S worldviews.

The Ways Paradigm: Bridging Ecotherapy with Religion and Spirituality

Other models address implicit spiritual values within ecotherapy, such as connectedness and transcendence (See Reese & Myers, 2011). The Ways Paradigm, however, is a transtheoretical, process-based model for bridging differences between ecotherapy and other R/S worldviews (Stewart-Sicking et al., 2017; Stewart-Sicking et al., 2019). By applying a lived approach, which considers R/S present whenever there is a connection to what the client or therapist considers "sacred, transcendent, or beyond the ordinary" (Ammerman, 2007, p. 225) this framework engages the plurality and fluidity of contemporary R/S (Ammerman, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2018) without sacrificing philosophical nuance. This broad definition includes the multiplicity of ways clients experience their R/S and helps prevent the unconscious projection of R/S worldviews onto clients.

The Ways Paradigm consists of three dimensions for working with clients' R/S—Ways of Understanding, Ways of Being, and Ways of Intervening. Our focus in this paper is on the first dimension, Ways of Understanding, which involve, "knowledge that explains personality theory and structure, normal and abnormal human development, and different ways people change" (Cheston, 2000, p. 256). Both counseling theories and R/S teachings carry ways of understanding essential questions about what it means to be human that emerge during therapy—Who is this person? Why are they suffering? How will they change? and What is their guiding vision of hope and flourishing? (Stewart-Sicking et al., 2017; Stewart-Sicking et al., 2019).

Four Psychospiritual Themes

Ways of Understanding rely on psychospiritual themes, which are archetypal like concepts for bridging understandings between psychology and R/S. They provide consistent meeting places for reflection and dialogue between psychological and R/S perspectives (Stewart-Sicking et al., 2019). Because ecotherapy expresses an implicit EBSR, this paper applies the psychospiritual themes as a practical guide to structure collaborative dialogue across therapist and client R/S worldviews; that is, between EBSR and other R/S traditions. Though Ways of Understanding operate primarily in the background, they help guide the assessment and conceptualization used to select ecotherapy interventions. They frame the exploration of clients' R/S meanings, identification of parallel concepts, and possibly enrich and/or deepen understandings.

The four psychospiritual themes of self, suffering, change, and flourishing provide a means to connect the implicit EBSR within Level Two ecotherapy with other worldviews about ultimate reality and meaning. The psychospiritual theme of the self pertains to questions of human nature, identity, and relationships. In line with James' (1890/2017)

understanding, the self refers to that question of what is included in the "me" and "not me." At the core of the *self* are three interrelated qualities—desire, relationship, wise-transcendence— that epitomize lived experiences of the self-in-relation to the sacred (Stewart-Sicking et al., 2019). *Suffering* and its perennial questions—why we suffer, what suffering means, and what to do with suffering—are at the heart of both psychotherapy and wisdom traditions. Though the specific understandings vary by R/S, there are two broad ways suffering may be understood across R/S traditions: (a) suffering of stagnation and enslavement and (b) suffering as transformation (Stewart-Sicking et al., 2019). Likewise, each R/S includes its own concepts and processes of *change* (forgiveness, nonattachment, ritual, etc.), aimed to move the self from suffering to their vision of flourishing (salvation, enlightenment, etc). They may employ techniques to improve functioning (prayer or meditation for anxiety), but R/S are ultimately pathways to personal transformation. Across R/S traditions, change can be conceptualized according to three components: how does it happen (balancing divine and human action), how does it unfold (suddenly and gradually), and what is its epicenter (heart and mind, but mostly heart) (Stewart-Sicking et al. 2019). *Flourishing* is a bridge concept that finds fulfillment in one's belonging within a greater community and ultimate reality. Frankl explained, flourishing comes, "Only to the extent that someone is living out this self-transcendence of human existence...not by concerning himself with his self-actualization, but by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward" (1979, p. 21). This larger dimension may be framed in terms of capital "T" Transcendent reality, lower case "t" experiences of self-transcendence, as well as horizontal realities of transcendence (e.g.-biosphere) (Deal & Magyar-Russell, 2018). Two case studies are provided below to illustrate

how the four psychospiritual themes may bridge different worldviews. Levi practices EBSR consistent with self-study of Buddhism, while Ray identifies as a Baptist Christian.

Case Study One: A Buddhist Client

Levi chose Barbara for therapy because they shared a deep love for nature-based spirituality. A week earlier he awoke terrified to a panic attack after burying his beloved dog Lincoln out back in the frozen soil. After surgeries, weeks of near recovery, and coaxed eating, Lincoln's heart gave out during an overnight at the vet. Levi was tortured with thoughts of Lincoln feeling abandoned.

For a decade Lincoln was family member, brother, child, and backpacking companion through graduate school, the tragic death of two parents, lost pregnancies, and a strained marriage. Levi shared, "All the other losses were supposed to be the hardest." The constancy and steadiness found in Levi's attachment to Lincoln moderated these other losses, but the levelling blow of his grief unearthed attachment insecurities. He was experiencing acute stress disorder with anxiety and extreme agitation.

Many interventions helped in the coming months of therapy, but Levi and Barbara focused on one particular experience. As Levi told it, "It was down by Black Kettle creek off one of Lincoln's favorite trails." Ozzie, Lincoln's surviving one-year-old "brother," had broken through snow and ice revealing vitality in the flowing creek water. Taking a cue from Ozzie, Levi got down on all fours plunging his face into the frigid water. Turning to feel the warmth of the early spring sun streaming through the towering hemlocks, he heard a voice, "life itself is movement." Drawing out his meaning, Barbara learned that Levi's loss and revelation had resurfaced his interest in the wisdom teachings—*anatta* (no self), *dukka* (suffering or dis-ease) and *anicca* (impermanence)—from a now lapsed Theravada Buddhist practice.

In that moment, held by the surrounding grandeur and intelligences of the forest, Levi settled into the reality of Lincoln's death with a little more ease. Identifying as part and parcel of nature's sublime mystery of interconnected life, he finally felt some vital part was returning. He found solace in nature's cycles of birth, death, and rebirth in other forms; that in nature's vast family of things everything belongs. He told of the mycorrhizal-interwoven sugar maple, quaking aspen, white oak, and hemlock roots lining Lincoln's grave, soon to take up his being. Eventually the pain of loss began turning to show other faces—the solace of nature's embrace, gratitude for all Lincoln taught him, and wonder at the mere fact of life, for getting to be here.

Application of the Psychospiritual Themes: Level Two Ecotherapy and Buddhism

The specific R/S meanings conceptualized through the themes depend on the therapist-client dyad. Given Barbara and Levi's similar worldviews, working with his EBSR was relatively straightforward. She knew Buddhism generally expresses an earth-based sensibility, but her knowledge of Levi's Buddhism presented a more intricate challenge.

Self.

Among ecotherapy constructs related to the self (environmental identity, sense of place, biophilia), Naess' (1990) ecological self illustrates Level Two EBSR meanings best. It aims *desire* at identifying and *relating* with a *wisdom* found in nature that transcends egoic self-interest and fosters belonging with all sentient beings, even the biosphere and cosmos itself. In Buddhism, *anatta* (no self or no-separate-self) understands the self as a desire driven illusion that arises through the relating of multiple causes and conditions (*Pratītyasamutpāda*). Buddhist dhamma teaches that *anatta* is essentially a wise and spacious awareness in which various fabrications arise and pass. Barbara supported Levi through his grief by encouraging him to trust the wisdom of nature—recognized by Levi's ecological *self*—and its healing reminder that life

itself is movement; that he, Lincoln, and the forest belong to one vast evolving intelligence. Barbara could bridge Levi's interest in *anatta* by exploring how he might hold and calm his fears of grief and abandonment within a kind and spacious awareness. *Anatta* might empower him to investigate and disentangle from the conditions giving rise to the story of abandonment.

Suffering.

In Level One ecotherapy, suffering stems from of lack of physical sensory exposure to nature and manifests in nature-deficit (Louv, 2005), ecophobia, and ecoalienation (Clinebell, 1996). In Level Two thinking, the R/S dimensions of suffering emerge as central. For instance, suffering issues from attachment to the delusion of anthropocentrism, which blinds meaning-making, identity, and the community from life-sustaining inter-dependence with the biosphere. Many modern people who seek healing in nature were inspired to that path by listening to their depressed and anxious feelings. And yet, waking up to one's love of sacred nature comes with the suffering of living with feelings of vulnerability and grief about the earth's desecration (Deal & O'Grady, 2020). Not unlike the call to service in other R/S traditions, EBSR offers a meaningful way to transform despair into collective action: "as we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us…" (Macy, 1991, p. xii). In Buddhism, *dukka* (suffering) is not only an inevitable part of reality, but a dhamma teaching about the propensity to cling to what brings comfort and avoid feels unpleasant.

Barbara helped ease Levi's *suffering* by collaborating with him on a ceremony to ritualize Lincoln's death as an offering of his body back to the interdependent web of nature. Together they explored how Levi's learning to let *dukka* (suffering) be present, rather than stagnating in old patterns of self-medication, taught him about gratitude for life and appreciation for the interconnected forest ecosystem in which he buried Lincoln's body. Barbara could explore how

Levi's transformative suffering and liberation, through connecting with sacred nature, might be expressed through environmental advocacy or otherwise.

Change.

The quality of change varies from Level One to Level Two ecotherapy. Where the former prescribes nature connectedness to conserve the coping of the anthropocentric self, the latter invites this self into a circle of reciprocal healing. In EBSR, change happens via the natural world's ability to awaken ecological consciousness gradually via gardening or suddenly while immersed in a backcountry wilderness. Once awakened, nature itself becomes co-healer (Berger, 2016) and source of transcendent wisdom. Awareness is broadened, one's myopic gaze extends outward, and change comes through harmonizing oneself with earth's natural rhythms. Macy (1991) wrote, "As we care enough to take risks we loosen the grip of ego and begin to come home to our true nature… the world itself, if we are bold to love it, acts through us" (p. xii). Meaningful suffering replaces the suffering of meaninglessness.

Through the psychospiritual theme of change, Barbara observed that feeling his belonging within this transcendent community of the forest supported Levi's *change* by offering continuity of connection to Lincoln. To bridge his EBSR and Buddhism she might invite Levi to reflect on how the reminder that "life itself is movement," so evident in nature's weather and seasons, connects to his experience of *anicca* (impermanence) from meditation. Though Levi might find a complementarity, it is also possible he experiences tension between Buddhist non-attachment and his investment in the continued functioning of the biosphere. Clients struggling with the enormity of their grief feelings, for people and/or the planet, may seek refuge in a kind of non-attachment that bypasses suffering when it becomes overwhelming (Carter & Greenwood, 2017).

Flourishing.

At Level Two ecotherapy, "Our fulfillment is not in our isolated human grandeur, but in our intimacy with the larger earth community, for this is also the larger dimension of our being" (Berry, 1990, p. xiv). Flourishing in EBSR means waking from anthropocentrism, realizing an ecological self and consciousness, and homecoming to a sacred reality where the well-being of people and planet is hitched together in one Cosmic narrative. EBSR fosters flourishing by reframing social norms (material wealth, status, etc.) and directing desire to the meaningful work of appreciating and protecting the web of interdependence. Suffering persists, but it is increasingly intermingled with feelings of reverence, wonder, and gratitude for all nature gives.

In Levi's Buddhism, flourishing comes through a quality of *bodhicitta* where the heart-mind awakens from clinging, aversion, and delusion. Freer to dance with the vicissitudes of life, *bodhicitta* may courageously engage the world, moment-by-moment. As Levi found solace in nature's rhythms, Lincoln's passing became part of a flourishing life, rather than its interruption. Barbara could help Levi explore, through the bridge of flourishing, how his grief drew him deeper into gratitude and reverence for getting to be part of this wondrous life-cycle. Perhaps his renewed sense of interdependence or "interbeing" (Hanh, 2012) with nature will extend to a *sangha* (human community) where Levi can feel his attachment insecurities soothed.

Case Study Two: A Christian Client

Ray was heartbroken, lonely and confused after years of struggling to keep his family intact and business afloat. He experienced depression periodically throughout his life, initially stemming from harsh, rejecting parents and sexual trauma. Ray's physician prescribed him numerous combinations of psychiatric medication over several decades, none of which provided

lasting results. After several family members encouraged Ray to seek therapy, he contacted Vicky, an eclectic clinician in private practice who did not advertise or promote ecotherapy formally, but was well versed in its theory and practice.

While Ray experienced some benefits utilizing a humanistic approach, he struggled to regulate his mood and affect between sessions. Vicky began exploring Ray's R/S background more deeply and discovered hidden pitfalls and strengths. Ray stated that throughout his youth he had a strong connection to his religious tradition. Baptist church services were a welcome respite and resource. As a teenager, however, Ray suffered from intense shame and confusion after an adult church volunteer made inappropriate advances toward him. His concerns were minimized by his parents and church. Ray attempted to live a normal life as he grew older, and maintained his beliefs and love of worship, but he coped by distancing from religious practices and community. These events in his spiritual life coincided with Ray's recollection of his first serious bouts with depression. Vicky began to see his R/S as an underutilized resource and possibly related to his mood disorder.

One day Ray came into a session full of enthusiasm, awe, and wonder, seeming to feel the best he had since Vicky had known him. Ray reported that he had been walking around the trails on his grandparents' property for several hours "just looking" at birds, frogs, and wildflowers. He remarked in a somewhat offhand way that it was "good to be in God's creation," and Vicky immediately made the connection between two potential resources in Ray's life: nature and spirituality.

The implicit EBSR values (Taylor, 2010) within ecotherapy predispose ecotherapists to be more at home with cases like Levi's than Ray's. Setting up this contrast was deliberate. Therapists are often undertrained in spiritual assessment (Oxhandler & Parrish, 2018), but many

ecotherapists could intuitively work with Levi's EBSR. Do they, however, have the tools to effectively address Ray's tradition? Though polls indicate sharp declines in Christianity, it remains America's predominant tradition at 65% of the population (Pew Research Center, 2019). Here, the Ways Paradigm model provides a theoretical bridge for moving between different, and sometimes conflicting, R/S understandings.

Application of the Psychospiritual Themes: Level Two Ecotherapy and Christianity

The initial challenge to doing ecotherapy with Ray depends on Vicky understanding his R/S worldview and mental models. A few preliminary assessment questions could aid this process. For instance, how are Ray's identity, self-experience, and theology related to the presenting problem? To what extent is his R/S a resource for coping and/or in need of transformation? (Pargament, 2007). Given that Ray experienced relational trauma resulting in lost trust with his R/S community and access to church practices, his problems may have more to do with exploring new pathways to access and express his sense of R/S connection. He disconnected socially, but not emotionally. Consequently, Vicki might build on Ray's experience of tapping his lost sense of R/S connection relocated in nature. The following represent some initial suggestions for how a clinician could apply the four psychospiritual themes to bridge Ray's R/S with the implicit spiritual themes in ecotherapy.

Self.

Baptist tradition tends to link the self to *imago dei* (image of God), Trinity, and Christ. For instance, humans are created in the image of a loving relational God of three-in-Oneness (Trinity), which represents an eternal and dynamic communion of creator (God), redeemer (Christ), and sustainer (Spirit). Theologian, Cooper-White, (2011) writes, "Human beings are intrinsically relational…connected with all creation and with one another, knit into the fabric

of creation, and interwoven in an unfathomably deep and wide 'living human web'" (p. 39). One parallel provided by the psychospiritual theme of self is that both the ecological Self and Christ illustrate pathways where the desiring heart finds rest, belonging, and wisdom through dynamic communion with God and Gaia.

Working forward from the positive self-experience Ray already reported having in nature, Vicky could help Ray apply his own terms to what she identifies as his "ecological self" through her ecotherapy lens. Would he call what he feels the holy spirit? Something else? Does the *imago dei* concept feel affirming and supportive to him? Conversations about these topics could lead Vicky to recommend visualization exercises where Ray re-imagines his relationships with nature, the holy trinity, and aspects of himself to find greater love of self, God, and nature. Passages such as Psalm 19 might take on new meaning, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge…their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19: 1-2 & 4, NRSV)." God speaking through nature might validate his connection to nature as a source of coping and/or worship.

Suffering.

Suffering in Baptist tradition revolves around sin, embodied as shame or as a shared existential state of disconnection from God. It is both acquired and self-inflicted. "However we run into it," theologians argue, "we run into it as wrecked relationship: with God, with one another, with the whole created order" (Taylor, 2000, p. 40). A parallel between EBSR and Christianity is the suffering caused by both anthropocentrism and sin cuts humans off from the unfolding process and source of creative life, be it nature, Gaia, Spirit, and/or God's creation.

The theme of suffering could help Vicky bridge Ray's Christian worldview and EBSR by helping expand his awareness of where and when he feels connected and disconnected. He might find solidarity and encouragement by attending to the ways other creatures survive through both striving and cooperation. By helping Ray tune in to the causes of his loneliness and isolation, she may help him identify and open to his longing for R/S connection and communion, including the ways he might practice these values with God's creation.

Change.

In Ray's R/S tradition change is generally a collaborative process of redirecting desire away from the causes of one's disconnection and back towards its original source in God and God's creation. According to priest and psychiatrist Meissner (1987), this is a grace-filled action, "directed to the formation through ego-activity of a spiritual identity," which is "regarded as an enlargement, development, or elevation of personal identity" (p. 54). Not unlike realizing the ecological self and consciousness, developing this spiritual identity often follows a transformational process of surrender; or, trading in a narrowly conceived sense of self for one capable of greater connection and belonging.

As Ray becomes more open over time to transformation, nature's movements may become like a visual mandala, echoing the stained-glass mythology of his indoor church's facades. When asked, Ray described how he enjoyed singing in church, and felt connected to "the holy spirit" when his congregation prayed openly for someone's healing. Engaging in outdoor song, prayer, and other ritual activities could help Ray transcend his individuality and connect with the sense of grace mentioned by Meissner (1987; p. 54).

Flourishing.

The path of flourishing in Baptist tradition involves seeking the "Kingdom of Heaven," as an individual, communal, and ultimate reality. Christ's example of sacrifice is the way forward: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone…but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24, NRSV). Death and new birth are a resurrection, wherein one realizes a "new relationship with God, a new union, a new wholeness…by which life is wholly unified" (Delio, 2015, p. 85). Flourishing also links to the incarnation of transcendent spirit inhabiting the freshness of the material world: "the life God gives is nothing other, nothing less, than God's own self. Life is God, given" (Lash, 1992, p. 104). Flourishing brings into focus parallel notions from EBSR and Christianity that the ultimate goal of life entails realizing or resurrecting a more unified and interconnected understanding.

Bridging the Christian "good life" with reciprocal ecological consciousness holds the possibility of a renewed, nature-connected Christian identity for Ray. Since the painful departure from his Baptist sense of flourishing rooted in union with church and Christ, Ray needs a new concept of flourishing that can inspire and motivate him to continue steps toward change. Vicky could help Ray envision further stages of flourishing, where he grows a personal and communal mission that expresses his Christian faith congruent with a Level Two ecotherapy outcome. "Creation Care," for instance, might act as a form or worship and/or redemptive healing. Bringing in scripture, In sum, the four psychospiritual themes frame the ways Ray's connection to "God's Creation" may act as a doorway to a) to feel himself beloved as a child of God (self), b) feel himself held and soothed by God's creation (suffering), c) awaken and reconnect to parts of his being unburdened by suffering (change), and d) experience transcendence and belonging with nature (flourishing).

Challenges and Suggestions

Ray and Levi's cases provide examples of how the psychospiritual themes bridge collaboration between different R/S worldviews. Where Levi's Buddhism expresses a natural affinity for EBSR, Ray's Christianity illustrates a more complicated scenario in need of additional exploration. In the following, we will elaborate some challenges accompanying use of the psychospiritual themes and suggestions for moving forward.

The first challenge, noted at the outset of the paper, concerns the inherent tension between EBSR and Christian dualism. To a certain extent, any encounter with ecotherapy poses a challenge to dualism, but how explicit is this tension in Ray's Christianity and where should ecotherapists focus their energy? Ways of Understanding meet this challenge by widening the R/S aperture to include not just R/S traditions but lived experiences. Without minimizing the importance of assessing what Ray learned about "God's creation" from his R/S tradition—and the extent it carries a hard or soft duality of God v. nature and spirit v. matter—lived experiences provide a means to reach beneath Ray's content and explore his felt sense of what is sacred. What did it feel like for Ray to be in "God's creation?" In what ways do the essence of his experience come into conversation with the God of his understanding? Divine concepts (conscious beliefs) and divine images (feeling sense) are not always so consistent (Rizzuto, 1979). Pluralism exists not only between persons, but within one's R/S worldviews (Ammerman, 2013; Bender, 2010). Ray may profess a Christian dualism that emerges in one context and embody a more holistic Christian understanding that emerges while in nature.

The themes offer a bridge for different worldviews to meet, but the central purpose of the bridge is to facilitate constructive dialogue. This is where ecotherapists can focus their energy, exploring common ground without minimizing differences. Dialogue is a nonreductive practice that encompasses multiple ways different understandings may interact, such as translating

meanings from one tradition to another, drawing correlations around a given topic, and noting how understandings might complement or even revise the other. If ecotherapists can meet the R/S worldviews of their clients with curiosity, self-awareness, and therapeutic intentionality—as resources with unique insights for healing—the dangers of values imposition lessen, and real dialogue becomes possible.

The second challenge involves the question of how ecotherapists, not currently well-versed in specific R/S traditions are to gain competence enough to work ethically with cases, such as Ray's Christianity. Therapy may begin with meeting clients where they are at, but healing also often depends on growing beyond those beginnings. In this sense, healing encounters are inherently subversive. Some amount of new learning (or unlearning) is necessary to undertake the process of changing the self from suffering to flourishing. Nonetheless, subverting a R/S worldview perceived as problematic is of a different order than helping a client leave behind cognitive distortions. This kind of values imposition is a one-way conversation, but dialogue is reciprocal exposure and engagement. Dialogue around the themes makes new learning available to therapist and client, where each expose the other to new perspectives as raw materials for meaning-making. As ecotherapists use dialogue to understand the R/S worlds of their clients, the odds of providing a skillful exposure to EBSR material increases.

Vital as it is to expand one's knowledge competency of R/S content, it is unrealistic to become an expert in all R/S worldviews, particularly those some ecotherapists may perceive as antithetical to a love of earth and sustainability. Ecotherapists can become experts in process, however, even as they continue developing competency with R/S knowledge. By opening to process, through use of the psychospiritual themes, ecotherapists can meet the challenge of R/S diversity and learn a skillset for respectfully bridging worldviews. Process-oriented approaches

to cultural competence create spaces for intersubjectivity where client and therapist may co-construct new meanings, together. Finally, the four themes of self, suffering, change, and flourishing provide a starting place to help prioritize and simplify the specific R/S understandings necessary for ecotherapists to work competently with other R/S worldviews.

Conclusion

The Ways of Understanding framework builds on existing work by offering four psychospiritual themes to explicitly bring EBSR into conversation with other R/S worldviews. Nature, like Buddha, Krishna, Christ, Mohammad and other spiritual teachers can act as a doorway through which clients might discover new resources and deepen their R/S. As Muir wrote, “going out…was really going in” (1979, p. 427) and "between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life” (as cited in Turner, 2000, p. 193).

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