

# Voices: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

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ECOTHERAPY:

EN PLEIN AIR

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## BOOK REVIEW

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**The Earth Has a Soul: C.G. Jung on Nature, Technology & Modern Life**, by C.G. Jung, Meredith Sabini (Editor). Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002, 248 pages.

**The Nature Principle: Reconnecting With Life in a Virtual Age**, by Richard Louv. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2012, 352 pages.

**The Mother Tongue: Intimacy in the Eco-Field**, by Will Taegel. Wimberly: 2<sup>nd</sup> Tier Publishing, 2012, 316 pages.

In her book, *The Earth Has a Soul*, Meredith Sabini offers a wide selection of quotations from Carl Jung that pertain to the hypothesis offered in the title. These are based in part on his visits with various indigenous people, his own reading and study, and, to some extent, his own subjective experiences as he spent time in nature. As we now know, he and his heirs chose to keep from public awareness for many decades his most powerful subjective experiences. Now available in *The Red Book*, it is clear that his personal experiences were, in fact, a potent and primary source of his theories. I have often lamented not having had the opportunity to meet Jung, and now I also lament his reticence about sharing publicly the deep experiences that informed his work.

Richard Louv currently shares generously the kinds of personal experiences informing the theories he presents in *The Nature Principle*. He argues convincingly that “Nature Deficiency Disorder,” the lack of sufficient direct contact with nature, causes many difficulties for human beings. Among these are attention deficit disorder and other common psychological and spiritual difficulties. Louv also presents striking research documenting the broad, positive impact of exposure to nature, or what he calls “vitamin N.” Also striking about these studies is the minimal dosage necessary for a therapeutic effect. Just having a view of a tree through a window can positively affect people inside a building. Like Linus Pauling with vitamin C, Louv would recommend much higher doses to get the maximum benefit.

Will Taegel, another contemporary, seems to have spent his adult life, and probably most of his childhood, as if he were a research subject in a study of the impact of sustained high doses of the natural world. In *The Mother Tongue*, he extends his reporting of research findings beyond that presented in his earlier works, such as *The Sacred Council of Your Wild Heart: Nature’s Hope in Earth’s Crisis*. As a psychologist cum anthropologist, he describes his journeys to a variety of fascinating, informative places. However, given that these destinations do not exist in the objective reality studied by most scientists, it might be more appropriate to describe him as a mystic or shaman. *The Mother Tongue* would be interesting and valuable simply as a report of Taegel’s observations about the

fascinating places he visits. The book is all the more valuable because, in addition to being a mystic or shaman, he is also a substantial scientist and scholar who draws from a range of academic disciplines. He is therefore able to offer an analytic framework from which to understand his experiences and to extract important meanings and implications.

Taegel concludes that a force or entity which he calls “the Primordial Mind/Heart” is the foundation of everything we can know, or even conceive of, at least as far back as the Big Bang. He also concludes that we can all learn to enter into meaningful and intimate dialogue with the Primordial Mind/Heart if we acquire a minimal fluency in—or perhaps simply remember that we already know how to speak—the mother tongue. He notes that spiritual communities based in nature can help us achieve fluency and thereby be able to enter into such intimate dialogue, and that our doing so is probably the only hope we have for survival in the current ecological crisis. He joins Louv in seeing great hope in the emergence of groups that make contact with nature on a regular basis by things as simple as a walk in a park or a nature preserve.

These three books have had an impact on me personally and also have implications for the practice of psychotherapy. At a personal level, the impact seems most noticeable when I meditate outdoors in the morning. All three books have encouraged me to believe there is something like the Primordial Mind/Heart seeking to communicate with me, and having this belief reinforced makes it easier to notice her presence and hear her. Clearly for me, there is something reassuringly feminine about the experience of being in communion with the earth’s soul, nature, or the Primordial Mind/Heart.

How to bring the wisdom of these three books into the psychotherapy consulting room seems more complex than simply opening myself during meditation to messages from mystical or shamanic realms. Among these complexities is the question of how to open myself in that way while sitting with a client, and of how much to share with my client of the experiences I am having at that moment. Fortunately, psychotherapy has already grappled with such complexities in terms of unconscious material. We already have a framework built around concepts such as transference, countertransference, and intersubjectivity. This framework is made even more substantial through the inclusion, by those who believe in it, of material from the collective unconscious.

Expanding this framework to include material from the Primordial Mind/Heart is a fairly simple matter *conceptually*; *experientially*, it may be more difficult. However, as in my meditation experiences, just having reinforced the idea that such a thing might exist can facilitate the ability to open oneself to new experience. One does not necessarily need to “believe in” something to experience it. A psychotherapist who does not believe in anything beyond the personal unconscious can still be affected by material from the collective unconscious, even though he may attempt to understand such impact in terms of material from his own personal unconscious or his client’s. Similarly, the Primordial Mind/Heart may speak to a psychotherapist in an attempt to contribute to the healing process

even if the psychotherapist does not realize that such a co-therapist is present, or that she might even exist. Committing oneself to being as deeply healing as possible to clients would seem likely to invite the possibility of assistance from such a co-therapist. Intentionally opening oneself to such assistance would also seem to be helpful, just as choosing to pay attention to one's personal unconscious as expressed in the countertransference can be helpful.

Regardless of how much one opens to various kinds of subjective experiences, there is still the question of what to tell the client about them. Clients entering therapy for the first time are often surprised when their therapist suggests that much of how they are experiencing their lives has to do with the influence of the personal or the collective unconscious. However, to the extent that the therapist believes in the reality of one or both of these concepts, it would be almost impossible to have a meaningful therapeutic impact without mentioning them to the client. Taegel refers to the psychotherapist as a "field guide" to the "eco-field" and offers information about how he sees the eco-field working. He compares this to the way Jungian analysts suggest readings that explain Jungian concepts.

There is some gray area in all this. A therapist might have enough direct experience with the personal unconscious to know of its reality while only entertaining the theoretical possibility of the reality of the collective unconscious. Nevertheless, it would seem helpful for the therapist to share his belief in even this theoretical possibility with the client. The same is true with regard to the concept of the Primordial Mind/Heart. One might simply point out the synchronicity of a bird landing in the tree outside the window at just the moment the client spoke about a desire to be more free. Or more directly, one might suggest that the client read books like those reviewed here, attend to both waking and dreaming experiences that might come from the Primordial Mind/Heart, and join a nature-based spiritual community to experience sweat lodges, vision quests, and various forms of group spiritual practices and celebrations.

William Taegel may be correct in his assertion that the only hope for the survival of humanity, and perhaps for all life on Earth, lies in our learning to speak the mother tongue. I think he is. If this is so, it gives us the opportunity as psychotherapists to use our consulting rooms for a larger healing than we usually assume is possible.

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Sometimes I go about in pity for myself, and, all the while, a great wind carries me across the sky.

—Anishinaabe-Ojibwe saying