

# Terrapsychology: "The Environment" is You!



**Craig Chalquist**

[Chalquist.com](http://Chalquist.com)

All things are full of gods.

-- Thales

As I drove through Blythe, California, one day I spotted a counseling center surrounded by yellow hazard tape. Any client headed there would thread a maze of street corners laid open and sidewalks torn up.

I imagined the client sitting down to say, "What's all the commotion outside? It was tough to get in here!" From my own psychotherapy training I could guess at the therapist's silent musings: Is this client really speaking about the twists and turns of therapy? About her family's tortuous interaction style? Does she feel lost in an emotional labyrinth? I was fairly sure the therapist would not ask: "How do you feel about how we dig up the planet?"

Isn't it odd that most of our psychologies treat the mind as entirely separate from the living world? That our standardized concepts of mental health make no reference to the health of our surroundings?

Scientific research makes it plain: the ecological health of the planet is not only a political or financial issue, but a mental health issue as well. Urban sprawl, air pollution, toxic waste, and sheer architectural ugliness have been shown to impact mental health. Anxiety and depression, rage and crime, family violence, and lost productivity at work and at school do not exist in a vacuum. Health and hope fail when landfills and refineries go up in neighborhoods too poor to fight back. We suffer a global warming of collective consciousness, an eroded capacity for holding our fire.

However, the relationship between self and world runs much deeper than measurement can tell.

Around the university where I teach, California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco ([www.CIIS.edu](http://www.CIIS.edu)), stretches the largest estuary on the West Coast. An estuary is an edge place, a threshold of mingling influences where species normally uninvolved with each other commune, rejuvenate, and gather nourishment.

In the kind of engaged psychology I practice, I teach my students to ask: What if this place is not only an ecological estuary, but a cultural, psychological, and spiritual one too? Suddenly, much that was mysterious about the fog-veiled Bay Area grows clear. No wonder we are so unconventional and cosmopolitan and diverse here. No wonder we love to experiment. Bridges emanate from our city like grapevines from the head of Dionysus, god of ecstasy, drama, ritual, and redemption.

Deep down we all sense the self-world connect. Seekers instinctively climb mountains to find peak experiences. Monks enter deserts for spiritual purification, and oceans in our dreams symbolize the deep unconscious. "Animal" derives from a word that means "soul." These cityscapes around and above us, these rivers and meadows, these skies and seas: they don't merely influence our minds down straight, simple runways of cause and effect. They are the stuff of mind. More precisely: Mind is the stuff of world.

Instead of assuming these things are split from us until proven imminent, terrapsychology, the study of how such "outer" presences show up within us, takes the communion of mind and world as given: the healthy forests and the enlivened family, the polluted bay and the polluted mood, the uncaged animal and the vital instinct. It matters that the Seine divides hemispheres of culture in brainy Paris, that cathedrals perch over pagan holy places, that Washington D.C., where a third can't read, buildings can't grow up, and politicians abort real change, crouches unborn in the uterus of the Potomac watershed where river branches fork like Fallopian tubes. Should we call it Wombington D.C.? What could be birthed here? What is prevented from emerging?

Going below surface interactions such as how sunlight affects self-esteem, we trace and interpret recurrent symbols and motifs that bridge inner and outer, learning how contours of the land and dances of elements parallel those of the human psyche. Naturally they do: we evolved here. Surely our mental foundations didn't drop into us from elsewhere?

Tending the ecological metaphors that join us so intimately to our world isn't easy when you've been taught not to. Along with guns, garbage, and game shows, American missionaries of monofeetic monoculture have exported and spread a mode of thought characteristic of the wayward lawyers, Puritans, and convicts who first arrived here from Europe: an intolerant literal-mindedness that multiplies absurdity while killing imagination. "A man shot six people on the downtown bus," goes a George Carlin joke, "got a transfer, and shot six people on the crosstown bus. In order to prevent this from happening in the future, authorities are discontinuing the transfer system."

The analyses after every school shooting dwell on armament, anomie, and baggy clothing but remain silent about the ongoing wars that give implicit permission to violence. As living drones desert the hive, mechanical versions invade the skies. Our civilization is propelled by internal combustion externalized. What does that mean?

It means we are kin to everything, and everything is kin to us. It means we belong here, and that we won't value or protect what we don't appreciate or love. To teach us this, detached psychologies of departure, of separation, propaganda, and consumption, must give way to engaged psychologies of homecoming if we hope to keep our footing on this warming, changing Earth.