

Coming Home to a Sentient Planet



Opening speech for “Conversations with a World Ensouled,”
a 2/16/11 event at the California Institute of Integral Studies
to celebrate publication of the new anthology [Rebearths](#).

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When I was a teen, a stage that lasted psychologically until well into my twenties, I couldn't wait to be free of everything I found oppressive: home, school, neighborhood, culture, even my own body at times. I knew nothing about my ethnicity or my ancestors and was fine with that, invested as I was in the philosophy of total self-invention. I might have dropped here from a passing alien spacecraft bound for elsewhere: anywhere but here. Had I known my birth father and aunt were pilots and my mother and her brother avid parachutists, I would have been delighted at their success in leaving the planet surface, if only temporarily. My aspirations for what I saw as my right to unbounded freedom could have been concentrated into one word: AWAY.

How things change when you begin to grow up. All through nine years of training as a psychotherapist I felt something crucial was missing. Nothing in my training so much as hinted that the ecological world mattered to our mental health and sense of earthly embodiment. In school I learned and practiced ideas and skills focused on treating something called “mental illness” that arose from within people or their relationships to other humans; I heard nothing whatsoever about the world outside the therapy session, the world in which we all evolved over more than a million years.

My extracurricular spiritual studies were of no help in providing the missing piece. From teachers and texts both ancient and contemporary I heard about how the world was an illusion, or a mistake, or a chance event of particles in collision, or even a temporary stage for the all-important human drama, after which we would all ascend from matter, consequence, and verdancy to some sterilized New Jerusalem, Pleiades, Mundis Imaginalis, collective unconscious, or Void, depending. Everywhere farther, faster, upward, and ethereal, never down, around, thick, or deep. Anywhere but here. Just give me the car keys, I can drive myself.

It wasn't being adopted that inflicted on me an ache of homelessness and rootlessness. It was ten thousand years of patriarchy, four thousand years of institutionalized religion, five hundred years of materialist scientism, three hundred years of Industrial Revolution, two hundred years of so-called Enlightenment, and one hundred years of multinational domination of the ecosphere, all of which came to agreement on one central argument: that Earth was no home, and certainly no divinity, but an unintelligent resource for purely human use.

I was born into this worldview of adolescent abdication. But I was also born in San Diego, the city whose resident author, Dr. Seuss, wrote *Horton Hears a Who*. In 2000, as I worked on my PhD in depth psychology, I began to dream that the city was angry with me for not hearing what it had to tell me. At that time I had no framework for understanding how a place could personify itself into my dreams like that. It was clear, however, that what assailed me originated from outside of me. Too much of what "she" said turned out to be true about San Diego when I took a closer look at the overcrowded freeways, the military overdevelopment, the smog, the pollution. No wonder the city when seen from space bears a gigantic frown.

Somehow, we were deeply connected, San Diego and I, below or beyond surface linkages like local weather, noise, or traffic. At first I felt invaded by the presence of the place. As the vestiges of adolescent omnipotence continued to burn away like morning fog, I got used to the feeling of human-nonhuman intimacy. What was good for San Diego was good for me; what harmed San Diego inflicted itself on me from within my own psyche. I could verify this, and I did. Could I prove it?

Not with the tools of positivist investigation. They too had been forged during the Long Abdication. A methodology that assumed from the start a split between subject and object could never grasp how toxic bays could go with toxic moods, congested commutes with congested interactions, or recovering landscapes with recovering peace of mind. It could not be a matter of making causal connections between realms already interconnected. Taking a cue from how C. G. Jung identified mythological motifs in the dreams of his patients, I found I could either substantiate or dismiss apparent bonds between people and places depending on how strongly they resonated and how consistently the history, ecology, and geology of the place repeated itself symbolically in the lives of people who lived there.

To make this concrete: we are gathered here in San Francisco, a city named after the patron saint of nature, adjacent to the largest bay and estuary on the Pacific Coast of North America. (Before that it was named Yerba Buena: "Good Herb.") Any ecologist will tell you that bays connected to estuaries make fantastically rich meeting places for enormous varieties of plants and animals. Here currents from far inland mix with those of the sea; here species that might never have

encountered each other regularly stop and interact. Permaculturalists call these “edge places” and advise us to grow things there. Ecopsychology began in the Bay Area, as did transpersonal psychology, John F. Kennedy University, Saybrook University, CIIS, and who knows how many other movements great and small and abundantly fertile. Here, exactly here, is where a vast coastal estuary parallels our estuary of culture and mind and spirit.

Here we realize that the currents, poolings, and fluctuations of our human intelligence originate in those of the natural world we have strained so hard to be free of. Here we reclaim our allegiance to it.

Today’s speakers have recently contributed their sense of such connections between self and place, inner and outer, human and nonhuman by writing chapters for the anthology [*REBEARTHS: Conversations with a World Ensouled*](#). They have taken terrapsychology, the recently formed field of deep connection grounded in ancient knowledge and lore, in fresh new directions. In the hands of these writers and speakers what began as a methodology for investigating the presence of place, land, matter, and planet has evolved into a polycentric genre of deep, heartfelt contact. We began with research suggestions and interesting anecdotes; now we have a record of encounter that includes master’s and doctoral research, practices for tending the soul of place and Earth, poetry, song, art, photography, and amplifications of fields like geology, anthropology, and psychology. My own passion for the work includes tracking which myths show up in which locations, especially here in California. The Dionysian imagery at large in San Francisco, his civic altar, reminds me of the redemptive, celebratory, cathartic, exuberant, transgressive, and consciousness-altering possibilities for terrapsychological work everywhere.

Because it’s time to hear from our other speakers, I’d like to invite you to listen in for how each has found the way back home, not as regressed children or defeated adolescents, but as deeply devoted witnesses to earthly connections recovered from the cultural underground. Perhaps the human destiny is to reach for the stars; perhaps we do gain a higher view when seeing our precious Earth from space. But we are learning, as responsible adults aware of our earthly obligations, that our own destiny is not the only one to consider. We are not alone on, in, or with this planet whose speech we are only beginning to decipher. And we are not going anywhere until we understand the deep significance of consciously Coming Home.