



Coming Home

Zelda Hall

In this essay Zelda discusses how we become alienated from our true home; disconnected from our bodies and from nature, and how this disconnection results in misguided attempts to control. How can we take responsibility for all aspects of our lives and evolve from the need to dominate to having a sense of the sacredness of all creation including ourselves?

*I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!*

(Burns, 1786)



Robbie Burns the Scottish poet, who was also a farmer, wrote this in the 18th century to a field mouse whose domicile he had destroyed when ploughing. It comes from the same poem as the well-known line: 'The best laid schemes o' mice an' men Gang aft a-gley'. Burns had great feeling for all living creatures, as for this tiny mouse.

Dominion or domination-the best laid schemes

Burns apologises for the way in which the 'dominion' of humanity has disrupted the unity of nature. It would appear that some things never change! Are we humans really destined to relentlessly consume and destroy the Greater Being of which we are a part? Or are we capable of having 'dominion' expressed as guardianship and care, in which we come home to ourselves as we truly are: part of the sacred whole, surrendering our need to dominate, to control and debase? This drive to subjugate and colonise is present on so many levels. 'Dominator culture' is a term coined by futurist and writer, Riane Eisler (1987). As Terence McKenna (1992) points out, "The entire structure of the dominator culture ... is based upon 'our alienation from nature, from ourselves and from each other.'" Carolyn Merchant in her essay *The Scientific Revolution and The Death of Nature* refers to how "...nature cast in the female gender, when stripped of activity and rendered passive, could be dominated by science, technology, and capitalist production." (Merchant, 2006). Clearly, this alienation would appear to have become a universal and disturbing phenomenon.

Eaten out of house and home

A few days ago I read about a young woman, who, while still a teenager, had fallen ill and, at 56 stone, had to be cut out of her house and lifted in a hoist to the ambulance. It cost an estimated £100,000 for emergency workers who spent eight hours cutting her free and removing two walls of her home in the process (Henley, 2012). I can only imagine the deep feelings of powerlessness and humiliation this young woman must have felt. It seems that she had not left the house for months. Food had been delivered in the form of large quantities of kebabs and chocolate. As with Burns' field mouse, her abode and her body, the housing of her spirit, were very damaged.

How could it get this far? Why this endless stuffing, this filling up beyond necessity, beyond pleasure? Could it be that this is symptomatic of the deep hunger that is experienced when we feel cut off, unloved, disconnected from our deepest being - which then leads us to an endless drive to consume, egged on by a culture in which the growth of the economy is our greatest priority. The statistics for obesity show that it is spiralling out of control, to epidemic proportions. In the UK alone, obesity levels have more than trebled in the last 30 years and, by current estimates, more than half the population could be obese by 2050 (Choices, 2014). Yet as Paul Maiteny points out:

"We *know* that obesity, heart disease, chronic fatigue, depression, cancer and other health problems are often symptomatic of lifestyles and associated desires and priorities. The same is true of our ecological malaise. But beliefs and feelings have a far tighter hold over behaviour than mere knowledge of facts. We are so strongly attached to our ways of living, and our *convictions* that they are good for us, that we avoid acting on what we *know* - that we are the causes of our own disease. What we prefer to see as the 'problems' are actually ways of unconsciously avoiding these deeper causes within ourselves. These are the real problem, but this is just too excruciating to admit." (Maiteny, 2009 p.1).

This denial then leads to yet more addiction, more 'stuffing'. Our ways of dealing with these 'problems', become attempts at control. Vast amounts of money are poured into research to develop medicines and 'treatments' to combat the results of our failure to deal with the underlying causes.

The alienation from ourselves, to which McKenna refers, is reflected in our attitudes to our own bodies. With an overdeveloped sense of ego we become as separated from our body as we are from nature. We look down at our bodies from our heads. And as Steve Taylor (2005) describes in *The Fall*, how humans fell from the position of grace of knowing ourselves as part of a greater whole: "They were the thinking ego inside their heads.....the body - and all its processes and instincts as 'other' to them."

I see this often in my practice when I ask "How does that feel in your body?" The eyes go upward, looking for an answer outside, anywhere than actually in her body. So the young woman mentioned above became a prisoner in, and an enemy of, her own body.

Birds and bees... and pills

Another indication of our further distancing from nature and from our own bodies can be found in the consequences of the widespread use of 'The Pill' as a method of contraception. It is currently used by more than 100 million women worldwide. When it was first introduced in the 1960s, 'The Pill' seemed to offer more self determination for women and a very welcome liberation from the constant fear of an unplanned pregnancy. I well remember obtaining the pill in my early twenties from a renegade doctor in Dublin, in defiance of the law at the time. "Oh," he said, "we can't have you getting up the spout." And I was grateful to him. However the pill constitutes a form of control of women's bodies in such a way that we escape the pull of the moon, the ebb and flow of the tides. Our bodies are 'fooled' into false pregnancy. Our bleeding is no longer 'real' and does not function as a cleansing (Owen, 1993). And when a twenty-eight day pill was developed, this semblance of a cycle was removed altogether. As the advertisements tell us, this 'frees us' even more to play tennis, wear white shorts, and swim every day of the month, if we so please.

Now however it seems that this widespread use of synthetic hormones and the suppression of our biology, for sometimes up to twenty years, have had a more widespread effect than we could have imagined. Ironically, while the pill didn't create the field of infertility medicine, it has turned it into an enormous industry. Inadvertently and indirectly, infertility has, for various reasons, become the pill's primary side effect. In addition, the excretion of the hormones into the sewage system is shown to play a role in causing endocrine disruption, which affects sexual development and reproduction in wild fish populations. In an attempt to reassure pill users that this all really isn't so bad, in a report on contraception (Moore, McGuire, Gordon, & Woodruff, 2011) we are told that:

"The good news is this: contrary to what has been stated or implied by media reports and anti-contraception advocates, *synthetic estrogen from birth control pills is not the sole or primary source of endocrine-disrupting chemicals in water.*"

AND

"... the volume of veterinary estrogens given to livestock each year in the US is **five times** (my emphasis) the volume of EE2 consumed by women who use hormonal birth control methods. "

I find this far from reassuring.

In fact, from the beginning, the development in the US of the pill was not about women's rights, it was about population control. When it was developed, America was consuming more than 50 percent of the world's resources (with 6 percent of the world's population), "The Pill symbolized the redemption of science, showing it capable of developing a technology to stabilize a world order that it simultaneously threatened to destroy." (Tone, 2001). This kind of dream of using technology to save ourselves from the destruction that we have caused, extends to the fantasy of being able to escape to another planet when we have exhausted this one ("PlanetQuest - The Search for Another Earth," n.d.).

Up all night

The dominator culture is reflected too in the increased use of Sildenafil or, as it is commonly known, Viagra. This was originally developed to treat erectile dysfunction in men. And it is widely prescribed for diabetics. However, since it was discovered that people using anti-depressants often experienced 'sexual dysfunction', Sildenafil was prescribed for men in this situation too. Next, researchers discovered that it also 'improved sexual functioning' in women so it was prescribed for them as well. One pill counteracting the effect of another pill. Now Viagra is widely used as a recreational drug, so that men can get an erection at the drop of a hat, so to speak, overriding any other clues their bodies might be giving them as to their physical or emotional health. Connecting with someone sexually becomes like an off /on switch unrelated to real intimacy or feelings of safety. This then compounds alienation from the other, to which McKenna refers above. Of course we could discuss how much of Western medicine is based on this very same paradigm, of the body as a machine that must do our bidding. However I will restrict myself to this particular aspect for now. It is in essence similar to wanting to be able to consume any food from any part of the world at any time of the year. There is no appreciation for the fact that our bodies too have seasons and cycles. This applies not only to women, but includes men.

Seed and sacrament

One can see a parallel to this in the drive of such companies as Monsanto to get control over another kind of reproductive capacity - seeds and their distribution. This company also formerly manufactured controversial products such as the insecticide DDT, PCBs, Agent Orange, and recombinant bovine somatotropin (a.k.a. bovine growth hormone) which is the kind of endocrine-disrupting hormone mentioned above that is found in our water. Monsanto now has patents of all kinds of seeds and is lobbying aggressively to obtain the rights to plant them. This would make us even more dependent on just a few big international companies for our food supplies. In *Spiritual Ecology* (Vaughan-Lee, 2013), Sister Miriam MacGillis, who runs Genesis farm, in the earth-centred tradition of Thomas Berry, speaks of 'the sacramental aspect of seeds, this primary revelation of the sacred in seeds.' She goes so far as to call the whole technology of genetically engineering life a 'desecration' and evil. We are attempting to control life at the very, very deepest level.

Coming to our senses

"We have become more cerebral, and retreated more and more from the senses - especially from smell, touch and taste - as if repelled by the body; and sight, the coolest of the senses, and the one most capable of detachment, has come to dominate all." (McGilchrist, 2010 p. 621).

I am a therapist, and part of my training is in body-oriented therapy. In the past, much of my work has been with women, helping them to appreciate the uniqueness of their own bodies and to experience their body as the wondrous creation that it is. Part of this work involves finding ways to protect themselves against the deleterious effects of continual assault with airbrushed depictions of womanhood and messages about how they 'should' look. I am not rigid in my opposition to cosmetic surgery, however in its increasing availability it adds to the illusion of the achievement of a state of visual 'perfection'. Surgery, diets, pills - they all hark back to the need to control and shape nature. While in the seventies there were discussions in the women's movement about the freedom of hairy legs or furry armpits, in the current millennium young women are considering breast enlargement, Botox or vaginoplasty. The drive to 'perfect' has reached into our most intimate regions.

Men, whose 'value' has always been judged more in terms of economic status or the size of their cars, are also now coming increasingly under pressure to conform to a certain physical norm. These days I have many more men coming to my practice.

Letting go of control

This is a story of one of those men. Details have been changed to protect his identity. Richard grew up as an asthmatic child in a family incapable of expressing affection, a father who never held his son. His way of getting acceptance was to be a high achiever - in sport, in school and later, in work. Inside, he was lonely from an early age. But he had developed a tough exterior, to the extent that his colleagues even wondered if he had some kind of autistic tendencies. Then, after a period of increased stress, the dam broke, the loneliness poured out and the tough facade crumbled. It was classified as 'burnout'. That was a term that was acceptable in the highflying corporate environment in which he worked. He was terrified of losing status. First there was a panicked striving to restore the former edifice. It failed. His soul would no longer countenance yet another betrayal of the part of him that longed for a deeper and more meaningful connection to life. He was overcome with waves of grief and after initial resistance, gradually began to accept that he had felt isolated for most of his life. He had suffered from stomach problems for quite some time. Instead of competitive sport, he started doing yoga and meditation. With so much free time on his hands he started spending more time in nature. His wife had always been a keen gardener and now he got involved too. Slowly but surely, and somewhat to his surprise, he found himself losing interest in his former 'corporate' self. I felt very touched when, in tears, he described how, for the first time in his life, he felt 'golden rays of light penetrate the grey' with which he had always felt surrounded.

Coming home

Solastalgia, a term coined by Glenn Albrecht, who describes himself as an environmental philosopher, is:

"... the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the 'lived experience' of negative environmental change. It is the homesickness you have when you are still at home. It is that feeling you have when your sense of place is under attack." (Albrecht, 2012)

At some deep level, like Burns' field mouse, the young woman in the story above must have felt this. As did Richard. If we connect to the deep rhythms, the ebb and flow of our feelings and sensations, if we sink deeply into our body, we can feel how we have been estranged. If we can allow ourselves to feel the grief and the loss we can, finally, return home. In sensing and honouring the sacredness of our own flesh we can extend our senses out beyond our skin to feel the air, the scents, the all-permeating vibration of the sacred web of which we are a part. Simultaneously with the joy of the realisation of our deep connection with all living beings and the earth herself, we sense the suffering not only of all other human beings, but of all creation. We are then, truly alive. We can slowly release the need to control, and the drive to dominate fades. We become a participant in the wonder of nature.

By taking responsibility for what our body needs and the longings of our soul and extending this awareness outwards to other creatures and to the earth, perhaps then we may come close to achieving the feeling described by Jung:

"At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons. There is nothing...with which I am not linked." (Jung, 1983 p. 252)

We can begin to heal the deeply wounded relationship with the earth. We can come home.

Zelda Hall M.A. M.Sc. is a psychologist and therapist with more than 30 years experience in working with groups and individuals. Having obtained an M.A. in Psychology and Philosophy (then referred to as Mental and Moral Science) at Trinity College Dublin, Zelda went on to train in different modalities such as Body Oriented Therapy and Breathwork in the Netherlands. During a health crisis in the early 90s she was guided by a dream to work with Arnold Mindell (founder of Process Oriented Psychology-POP) and colleagues. She studied Process Work for ten years and was chairperson of the Association of Process Oriented Psychology in the Netherlands for seven years. Her approach combines elements of all aspects of her training and knowledge developed throughout the years. Recently Zelda completed an M.Sc. in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology (validated by Middlesex University) with the Alef Trust in cooperation with the Scientific and Medical Network. Her research thesis was on the subject of childhood dreams and their significance for psychospiritual development and physical health.

Two chapters on dreaming by Zelda are included in the recently published book: *Transpersonal Ecosophy, Vol. 1: Theory, Methods and Clinical Assessments: Volume 1* (Schroll, 2016)

References

- Albrecht, G. (n.d.). *The Age of Solastalgia. The Conversation*. Retrieved June 9, 2014, from <http://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337>
- Burns, R. (1786). *Robert Burns Poem - "To a Mouse."* Retrieved May 15, 2014, from http://www.robertburns.org.uk/Assets/Poems_Songs/toamouse.htm
- Choices, N. H. S. (2014, June 17). *Britain: "The fat man of Europe" - Live Well - NHS Choices*. Retrieved July 4, 2014, from <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/loseweight/Pages/statistics-and-causes-of-the-obesity-epidemic-in-the-UK.aspx>
- Henley, J. (2012, May 25). Georgia Davis: "What kind of support was she getting?" *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/may/25/georgia-davis-what-support-was-she-getting>
- Jung, C. G. (1983). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. London: Fontana Press.
- Maiteny, P. (2009). *Finding Meaning Without Consuming. The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy*. Dartington: Green Books. Retrieved from <http://fisherb.people.cofc.edu/st%20files/Meaning%20without%20Consumption.pdf>
- McGilchrist, I. (2010). *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Moore, K., McGuire, K., Gordon, R., & Woodruff, T. (n.d.). *Birth control hormones in water: separating myth from fact*. Retrieved June 24, 2014, from <http://www.arhp.org/publications-and-resources/contraception-journal/august-2011>
- Owen, L. (1993). *Her Blood is Gold: Celebrating the power of menstruation*. [San Francisco, Calif.]: HarperSan Francisco.
- Steve Taylor. (2005). *The Fall: The Insanity of The Ego in Human History and The Dawning of a New Era*. Winchester ,UK: O Books.
- Tone, A. (2001). *Devices and Desires: a history of contraceptives in America*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Vaughan-Lee, L. (2013). *Spiritual Ecology: the cry of the earth, a collection of essays*.