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IMAGINATION AND THE WORLD: A CALL FOR ECOLOGICAL EXPRESSIVE THERAPIES

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Several years ago, standing in the caves of Font de Gaume in France before the graceful animal images dancing on the walls, I felt as connected to the 17,000-year-old paintings as if I had just watched them emerge in an art therapy session or in a painting studio. And more, I felt a profound sense of gratitude that moved me to tears. It was as if I had just been introduced to my ancestors and they had spoken to me about life, the surrounding world, spirit and art-making. Later, seated in the sunshine at a nearby village cafe, I wondered at the power of these colored marks on a rocky surface to connect me not only to the animals they represented but also to the people who painted them. Like many others before me, I speculated on how the artists had traveled deep into the warren of caves and searched the surface of the walls to find just the right curve to swell out this antelope's belly, that deer's haunches. How had they mixed their colors and applied them, by flickering torch-light, to surfaces often higher than arms-reach or hidden low beneath an overhang? How and why?

And, all these millennia later, yet another small group of people of assorted nationalities, and perhaps worldviews, would not only agree that those colored splotches depicted animal-forms but would also respond to the life they represented and to the artists' appreciation for that life. Art is indeed magical and mysterious, reaching as it does, through time and space, deep into our core. Having once seen these images how can we view our world, our selves, our history, in quite the same way? Franck (1973) describes his own response to cave paintings where he experienced:

> a leap from a platitudinous world to one of mystery. All is suddenly suffused with meaning. Once this leap has been made, once wonder and awakening have flashed upon us, we inevitably fall back into our half-sleep—but with a difference, for a radical change in perception and feeling has taken place. (p. 121)

My own involvement in art over the past 35 years has strengthened my feeling of purpose—not only personal purpose—but has inculcated in me a deep sense that life itself has meaning. Accompanying that sense is a growing reverence for life that is cracking open the mechanical view of the world which was bequeathed to me and to my generation. This gradual transmutation takes place in art-making, often out of my awareness, because the arts process provides me with a meeting-place, a dancing-ground of change, where the worlds within interact with those beyond my skin. It is a passionate process, difficult, often painful, and also ecstatic and peaceful by turns. What I learn within this process informs my whole life. It was through my work in the arts that I also came to understand how deeply interconnected the natural world is, including humankind. I had been taught to draw objects, things in proximity with other things,

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Figure 1. Tree Space Holding Pattern.

but as essentially disconnected as if they actually existed separate and alone, just as they were on the white pages of my sketchbook.

One day I was told to draw the shapes between tree branches. In that moment a decades-long practice of looking-between was born. First I noticed the spaces; then I realized that the spaces held relationships and were equally as important as the things that made the spaces. I wondered if the things made the spaces any more than the spaces, or the relationships within them, made the things. I practiced seeing the spaces and the things simultaneously and discovered a diffuse way of seeing that allowed me to apprehend a world of patterns (Figure 1). I began to think differently about the world around me. No longer a collection of discrete things and people, I saw how I inhabit a pattern that includes everything. The joy of knowing that there is nowhere to fall out of, that all is connected, colors my world with a sense of awe.

Art traditionally has served as an intermediary between humans and our environment. For at least 17,000 years, art has served as a conduit for human awareness, providing means for recounting experience, for conveying perceptions and for expressing emotional, physical and cognitive reactions to a variety of phenomena. Through the art process, people strive to make meaning, searching for coherence and clarity about the human condition. The art process transforms whatever is brought to it. Art hones our abilities to perceive and reconfigure unusual and dynamic patterns, associations and connections. Making art implies travel amongst the realms of the sensuous and the intellectual, the abstract and the material, the spiritual and the mundane.

Like others before me, I seem to lack adequate language to describe either the process or the state of an artist perceiving the world. This difficulty with language indicates a cultural attitude towards the arts. Indeed, in this century and this industrialized culture, we tend to minimize art in general, equating it with art-products—the value of which can be quantified in monetary terms—or dismissing it as a frill and peripheral to the serious business of life. It is commonly believed that arts processes and perceptions are confined to artists who, in turn, are seen as people who create and sell art. However, art is not for artists alone and it is not just a means for producing objects or performances. “It is the chance to encounter dimen-

sions of our inner being and to discover deep, rewarding patterns of meaning" (London, 1989, p. 7).

Meaning is shaped by values and constructed out of the raw clay of experience. Experience depends on the degree to which we are able to be in touch with the qualitative world which we inhabit. "This qualitative world is immediate before it is mediated, presentational before it is representational, sensuous before it is symbolic" (Eisner, 1993, p. 5). We must all ask ourselves if we have built a body of experience with this qualitative world? What comprises our day-to-day world and how do we interact with it? Do our memory cells contain the sound of streams in full spring spate, the smell of an animal birthing, the feel of branches supporting our bodies high above the ground?

For many who live the busy lives associated with our late twentieth century culture, direct experience, the shortest route to relationship, is limited in comparison to the torrents of manufactured experiences. This is particularly true of our experience with our neighbor species which we call "Nature." We have learned to perceive them as separate and inferior to ourselves. We live our lives as if we were not connected to our life-support systems—we breathe engineered air and drink containered water that is divorced from its source. We relate mostly to managed "Nature," which has been confined to parks, gardens and pots. For too many of us living, luxurious though it may be, comes packaged in steel, concrete and plastic. As Griffin (1995) points out:

> (All) around me another disappearance was occurring. The sense of a terrain—the shape of a watershed system, for instance, mountain snow melting into rivers traversing a distance their bodies remember and know—*was decomposing in the mind*. The mountains and the valley were still there, but *one hardly saw these shapes*. What in turn were coming to delineate the landscape were steel and concrete structures, and superhighways. (italics added, p. 26)

Twenty-five years ago, art therapist Kramer (1973) warned of the perils of a life filled with synthetic experience. She described a burgeoning class she called "the spoiled, underprivileged child, notable for great materialism, excessive wastefulness and confusion about relationships" (p. 23). This "child" provides a metaphor for Western urban culture of the 90's, which is also characterized by increasing fragmentation and alienation. Much of our experience of the world beyond arms-length comes to us second- or third-hand via screens. The information is edited, rehearsed and filtered with impunity through committees. As a result, our internal worlds have become populated with manufactured forms designed to serve the purposes of others. The imaginations of our young children are laden with logos, commercial jingles, computerized images. Stereotypes, which also affect how and what we perceive, abound within the larger culture and also filter into our work in the studio or therapy room. These stereotypes substitute for the expression of feelings of emptiness born of deprivation of direct experience. Where are the mountains and trees? The creatures that run, crawl, fly, swim? Do they exist anywhere in our imaginations?

Without continuing experiences with earth, sand, water, trees, animals and insects, by adolescence and adulthood we suffer from a profound absence of nature in our memories and imagination. In their place are manufactured images that are essential to a culture of consumerism. Remembering a large green frog puppet that speaks, we forget how to relate to the life and death of the real being; embedded in the experience of cartoon images we are blind to our actual connections with life around us. Franck (1973), an artist, describes the implications for the ecological crisis when he writes "Millions of people, unseeing, joyless, bluster through life in their half-sleep, hitting, kicking, killing what they have barely perceived. They have never learned to SEE, or they have forgotten that man has eyes to SEE, to experience" (p. 4).

Our internal lack of relationship with other species handicaps us in perceiving our relationships in the outer world. And so, more-than-human-nature becomes extinct in our inner worlds long before the living world slips away, species by species. Tragically, because we are accustomed to getting our information about the world around us from newspapers, television, computers, we are not even aware of the gradual silencing of the twitters, roars, clicks and rustles of our neighbors in the web of life.

We humans have a hand in the creation of our experience. The quality of this depends on the ways we employ our minds. Our conceptual life, shaped by imagination and the qualities of the world which we think we experience, gives rise to the intentions that direct our activities. As art educator Eisner (1993) writes "Intentions are rooted in the imagination" (p. 7). How can we intend to work towards maintaining life on this more-than-human planet if we cannot even

conjure a vision of a real world? Rather than what we have been directed to perceive, it is richly varied beyond our wildest dreams.

If we continue to perceive the rest of the planet existing to serve our needs, we will continue to exploit natural resources and degrade habitats and ecosystems. As members of a consumer society our needs are cultivated to be endless. Therefore, if we do not change, they, and we, will consume the whole planet. This change is nothing short of a paradigm shift, involving changes in our perceptions, our values, the way we think and consequently act. Physicist and educator Capra (1992) describes the changes as shifts from "the rational to the intuitive, from analysis to synthesis, from reductionism to holism, from linear to non-linear thinking" (p. 119). There must be corresponding shifts in values, for example, from competition to collaboration, from expansion to conservation, from quantity to quality, from domination to partnership. It is only by becoming aware of our perceptions, thinking, values and behavior that we can begin to make these shifts.

Ecopsychology is directed towards addressing the changes that are needed. According to psychologist Conn (1995), ecopsychology is cultivating a new consciousness. Ecopsychologists work toward integrating body, mind, spirit and soul and fostering sustainable, mutually enhancing relationships among humans and the more-than-human natural world—ecology and psychology. Just as psychotherapy is a process of changing awareness and behavior, so the arts process is concerned with bringing transformation, metamorphosis, change. Its business is "the transformation of one form into another, of a symbol into an insight, of a gesture into a new set of behaviors, of a dream into a dramatic enactment" (Zinker in London, 1989, p. 35). In Expressive Arts Therapy, the processes of the arts and psychotherapy connect at a fundamental level. Expressive Arts Therapy serves to communicate intuitions, memories and feelings, beyond the scope of words. In this paper, Expressive Arts Therapy is understood to include Art Therapy, Dance Therapy, Music Therapy and Drama Therapy, as well as the therapies of poetry, sandplay and other modalities linked to art forms and therapy. I believe that these processes are inherently healing and integrating. Consequently, I am advocating the addition of ecology to this mix of arts and psychotherapy. It promises to give birth to work that is important and timely.

Inward attention has been a predominant concern of Expressive Arts Therapy. Practitioners are intimately involved with attending to inner process while also being deeply involved in external events. Expressive Arts Therapy increases methods of communication, expands insight beyond the limits of the reasoning mind and also provides opportunity for balance, such as between analytic and synthetic thinking. I have found through my work that art processes provide tools for community building; places where voices that have been silenced can be included, where dialogue can happen, where paradoxes can be lived and tensions held creatively. Artists and Expressive Arts Therapists use our modalities to shift perspectives of ourselves and others. It is just a short step to extend the process to shift perspectives about the more-than-human world.

Traditionally, Creative Arts Therapists and Expressive Arts Therapists work to strengthen their clients' egos for coping with the stress of life and facilitating their maturation processes. (I use both the terms Creative Arts Therapists and Expressive Arts Therapists to emphasize the inclusion of the work of all who use the different titles.) Maturation, as described by art therapist Kramer (1973), is the attainment of full functional capacity, and includes functioning in relationship to the individual's environment, family and social circle, work and society. When society is busy eliminating fresh air, clean water and uncontaminated food, in large part because of the denial and psychic numbing of its members, then neither the society nor its members can be seen as fully-functioning. A valid comparison might be made to the behaviour of an individual who fouls his living quarters, drinks dirty water, puts poison in his own food and that of his children. Not only the maturity but also the mental health of that individual is questionable.

Nowhere do we need healing more than on the grand scale of human relationships to the Earth. I believe that our professions can be encouraged to see themselves as both embedded in a culture in desperate need of change and also as change-agents, particularly when combined with a systemic theoretical framework such as deep ecology. Levine (1995) comments on the reluctance that many other Arts Therapists have to theorize—"rarely do we try to understand and to reflect upon our whole project in terms of bringing together the discipline of the arts with the work of change" (p. 50).

Deep ecology is a movement for radical change which regards the world as interconnected and interdependent. It recognizes the intrinsic value of all liv-

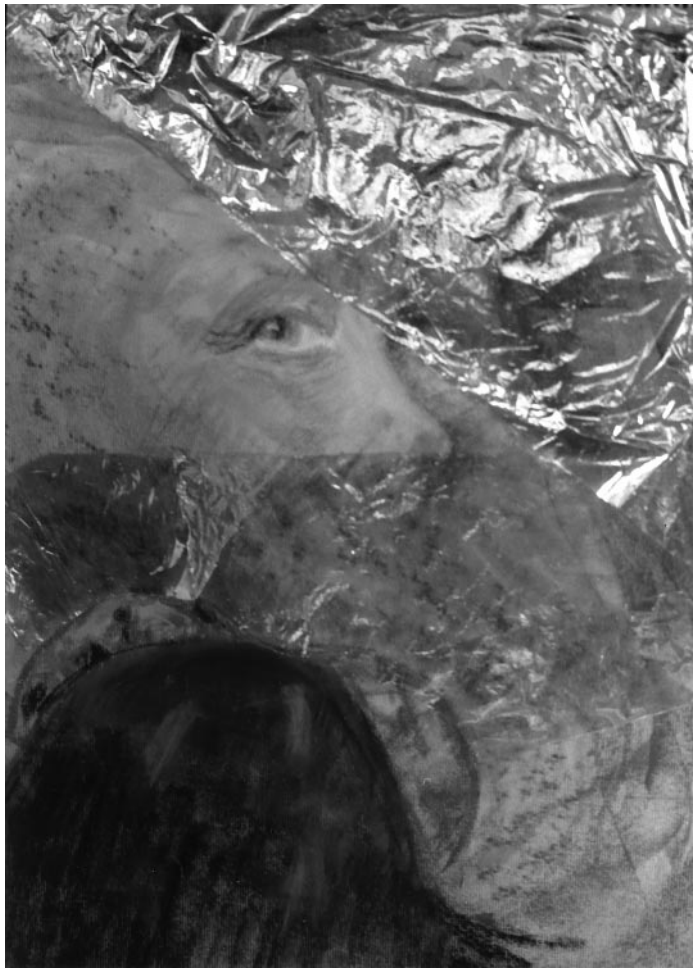

Figure 2. World View.

ing beings and views humans as one particular strand in the multi-stranded web of life. Many deep ecologists feel that ultimately all the problems facing the world are a result of the same crisis—"a crisis which is largely a crisis of perception. Only if we perceive the world differently, will we be able to act differently" (Capra, 1992, p. 116). As touched on earlier, in western industrialized culture we perceive the world as alienated and fragmented (Figure 2). Therefore, we humans also feel isolated and less than whole. Feelings of alienation can be addressed through the process of identification. Identification is described by deep ecologist Naess (1995) as where "we see ourselves in others" and where another being's interest or interests are reacted to as if they were our own (p. 226). Deep ecologists believe that identification with other life-forms is a basic necessity for interacting with the environment and therefore, a most important process for increasing ecological consciousness.

The process of identification could be seen as a challenge to those of us trained to facilitate our clients' separation from primary care-givers and their individuation as part of the maturation of ego-strengths. We are asked by deep ecology to expand our notions of ego and to consider wider relationships of the individual than we have been taught. However, the processes of identification are not meant to substitute for the maturation processes but to augment them. Naess (1995) proposes a revamping of the traditional model of maturation of self where the devel-

opmental stages progress from ego to social self to metaphysical self. He states that this model ignores our natural surroundings. Ferguson (1980) refers to this as "the great and final paradox: our need to connect with the world (relationship) and to define our unique position in it (autonomy)" (p. 29). Naess (1995) challenges us to include the stage of the ecological self. He describes this as the self "with which (a) person identifies" and, in so doing, shifts the emphasis from the object "self" to the dynamic process of "identifying" (Naess, 1995, p. 226). Thus, through the cultivation of identification, the Ecological Self is born.

Educator Thomashow (1995) also describes this as Ecological Identity work, which entails a "search to recover and reclaim the importance of nature in one's personal development" (p. xiii). The basis of this work is a reflective process in which "people begin to consider how their actions, values and ideals are framed according to their perceptions of nature" (p. 172). It involves nothing less than a reconstruction of personal identity. Concurrent with this reflective process, I believe a reconsideration of our perceptions of nature is urgently necessary. This involves repopulating our imagination and memories with direct experiences of nature.

Art processes can be used to reclaim our memories and imaginations through building relationships with nature. Ecopsychologists such as Conn (1995) recommend that their clients spend time in nature looking, listening, smelling, moving and drawing. Fostering an Ecological Identity can ameliorate feelings of isolation. Through Ecological Identity work we aspire to reach

> the mode of consciousness in which an individual feels connected to the cosmos as a whole, in some immediate experiential way, an awareness of belonging to the cosmos, of communing with the cosmos. (Capra, 1992, p. 117)

The processes in the arts of soul work are also a part of the process of identification. They are described by McNiff (1992) as when "Art becomes a ritual act that opens people to the experience of soul" (p. 44). In my experience, when an artist opens to her subject on what I call the "soul-level," a particular relationship occurs. Through the art process, I take in with all my senses the rock, tree, body that I am drawing. An exchange occurs in which my subject is imprinted in me and, by the same token, I have become part of "it." I must be careful not to disengage by reducing the relationship to an "it," an object to be packed away labeled "rock." If I remember the exchange and contemplate it fully, the numinous event continues and transforms my relationships to all rocks.

A similar process occurs when I am moved to express with dance, the ineffable, the marvelous and complex beauties of a particular place. I remember a mountain ridge, for instance, where the dance seemed to come through me and I learned that, by tuning in to my body, I tune into the earth-body. Since then I cannot imagine mining that ridge or building there without experiencing great, great pain. Again McNiff (1992) says, "Concentration on the 'other' ensouls the world" (p. 2).

We can take arts processes out of the studio into "Nature" with the intention of hearing and dancing with the soul of the world. This process can be perceived as en-souling the world—to which we humans belong. Here we approach respectfully and with reverence, not in an effort to match our painting techniques with what we perceive, nor owning the view through our gaze, but by being present through all of our senses. In this way we essentially connect with where we are, with the other beings present, and our essences connect. Zen artist Franck (1973), who describes the parallels between meditation and the artist's way of seeing, describes it thus, "This seeing-into is at the same time the leap out of the isolation of the Me into the community of beings and things, in the absolute present, the Absolute Presence" (p. 21). Thus, as we express our Selves we are also being impressed. The impression by the natural world, which has evolved with us and is connected to us through our common DNA, both augments and promotes the development of Ecological Identity.

In the course of identifying with other species, inevitably we are confronted with emotional reactions both to the beauty and wonder of our planet and to our culpability in the death of many of its life-forms (Figure 3). In the deep ecology movement, the need for working with feelings of despair and helplessness has been recognized by activists such as Seed, Macy, Fleming, and Naess (1988) and Macy (1991). Together they formulated a process called Council of All Beings which they conduct and train others to conduct around the world. These councils encourage human identification with other life-forms through creative rituals in which voices other than human are heard, and points of view other than the anthropocentric emerge. An important step in the Council process is

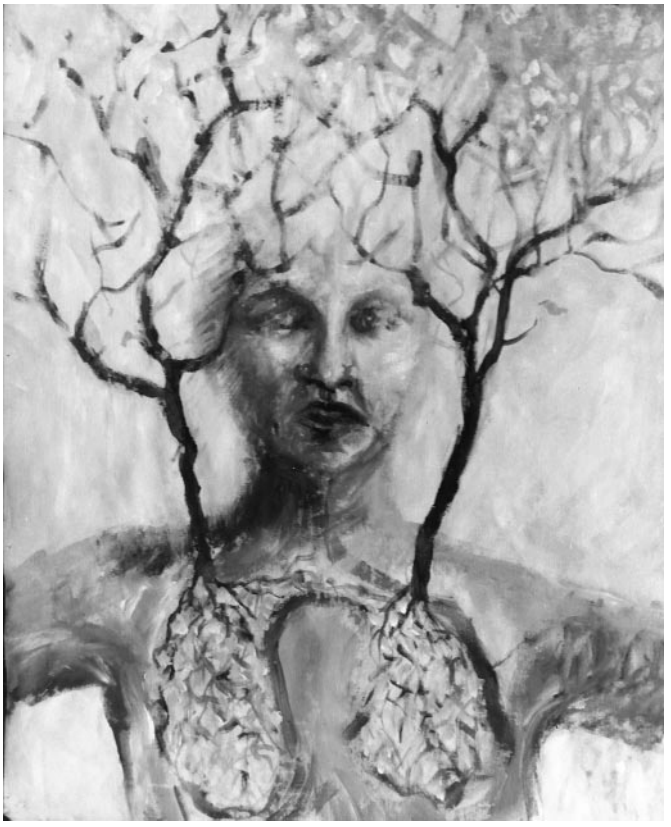

Figure 3. The Trees Are Dying.

grieving for what we have lost. It is through the expression of sorrow and witnessing the sorrow of others that a deep connection is made between the human members. Shifts occur which allow the creative to emerge and, with the feelings of connection, often empower members to take action on behalf of issues close to their hearts.

In addition to working with the tremendous feelings of grief that occur through this kind of awareness, it is vital that there also be room to access and express the feelings of wonder and exuberant joy at being in this amazing world, which so many of us felt as children before our socialization process dampened forceful expressions of any kind of emotion. The skills and methods of Expressive Arts lend themselves well to this kind of work. In the arts process, a removal from the mundane world can happen, which leads to a holding space where the range of feelings are felt and expressed in an unhurried manner. The perimeter of the page, the dance-space, the amount of clay, and the witnessing support group provide the boundaries within which a sense of safety and timelessness can arise.

> The art process carries us free of conscious thinking and judging. This absorption in the process is what heals. It accesses another part of oneself, where the mysteries of pain and release, grief and anger and despair, longing and hope are present. Richards (in Allen, 1995, p. vii)

Thus, the tradition of the arts can be mobilized for facilitating expression of deeply repressed feelings, for providing opportunities to transform both intra- and interpersonal relationships and for transmuting perception. Despite the elapsed time between an experience and its re-emergence through the arts process, there is an immediacy of feeling that can be conveyed through paint or movement or verse.

Figure 4. Remembering the Bird.

An example from my own experience follows:

Setting myself the color green as a focus, I mixed paint and applied it to a small sheet of paper. I had taped the small sheet to a larger sheet of butcher paper to protect the wall. As I swirled the paint around, a shape appeared, large enough to extend from the small piece of paper to the edge of the protecting sheet. I let my brush move where it would until dense woods against a summer sky appeared. Through the woods flowed a dark, dark river. I watched as my brush worked, noting that I knew of only one black river, the Lamaha from my childhood in Guyana. The paint came thick and fast and soon I realized that the scene was an incident from when I was about seven or eight years old. In the water at the bottom and central to the picture was a struggling bird, one wing beating the air furiously while the other dragged helplessly in the water. Blood streamed from the bird. Below it and approaching, was a shoal of piranha drawn by the smell of the blood. During the process of painting my childhood experience was revivified. Strongly poignant feelings and sensations surfaced about a barely-remembered event. Once again, I heard my parents' rebukes for an "unseemly" show of emotions about the hunted bird brought down in the water by a visiting dignitary.

I followed up this painting with another. This reflected on the process of painting and the feelings that arose from the depicted memory. Later reflecting on the process, I noted that I had drawn myself, the little girl, in the water with the bird in this picture (Figure 4). I saw how strongly I was identified with the bird. I believe that this is a representation of Ecological Identity, an identity that I had lost or misplaced during the years of growing up.

Pursuing this, I discovered that there has been limited research into children's connections with nature. Yet often in a group with ecologists or environmental activists, I have noted that many recount the importance of a tree or a body of water to them as children. Children, it seems, often search out places to be alone. According to Hart (in LaChapelle, 1988), many of

these places contain water, dirt or sand and provide a place for imaginative play. Deep ecologist LaChappelle (1988) describes the developmental process of bonding with the earth that occurs for a child after the stage of bonding with the mother. Although this has become more difficult to accomplish when children have little direct contact with nature, she reassures us that "it doesn't take a very large piece of nature for this to occur" (p. 136). If this is so, for many of us the process of Ecological Identity may well include surfacing early memories of important childhood bonds with the earth. Where direct experience is not possible, involvement in Expressive Arts techniques can lead us to envision the places in which we used to play, thus to renew and explore our relations with them.

But what of people who were raised in cities with little contact with nature? If there were no significant childhood memories, on what would the increasing numbers of urban dwellers base their ecological identity? My curiosity about this question led me into a number of conversations. One with Catherine Sneed, Director and Founder of The Garden Project at San Bruno Jail in California, provided insights from her experience. She pointed out that many of the offenders with whom she works are low-income inner-city dwellers without the resources for trips to forests or shore (Sneed, 1996). She studied several thousand people who worked in the project gardens, and never heard of one who did not, over a period of time, become bonded with the earth and devoted to the beautiful vegetables that they tend. Art processes are essentially life-enhancing, therefore they can be used with great efficacy in ecological work. Our intimate knowledge of art processes and our familiarity with the imagination provide steps towards an expanded identity, an Ecological Identity. As McNiff (1992) writes: "Imagination is the sympathetic medium with which dialoguing with images occurs, the faculty with which we establish compassion, understanding, and respect for things other than ourselves" (p. 38).

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