

## On becoming a tree hugger

by Matthew Henson

*Say it once and say it loud: "I'm a tree hugger and I'm proud!"*



*Ecopsychology is to do with the psychology of our relationship with this beautiful planet, the earth. Why are we collectively being so destructive to the earth and the other beings with whom we share it? How can we transform this into a healthy relationship and a benign human presence on our planet? (Prentice, 2018).*

The first ecopsychology workshop I attended was in Derbyshire, in 2009 I think, and was facilitated by Nick Totton, who was one of the earlier UK ecopsychologists. I had reservations about the weekend, which I talked about in the opening round. I was anxious that the workshop might be too 'airy-fairy'. I had been reluctant to tell friends and family that I was attending because of the projected judgements I feared they might make. I informed the group that, in short, I was worried that the workshop might be for tree huggers and, if it was what would that say about me? It was a serious hurdle I had to overcome if I was to be fully present during the weekend. I was not, and never would be, a tree hugger!

I was ignorant at that time of the origins of the term 'tree hugger', knowing nothing of the courageous 294 men and 69 women from the Bishnois branch of Hinduism, who died in 1730 while protecting the trees in their village, by literally clinging to them as they were slaughtered by foresters. Neither was I aware that this inspired a tactic, known as tree satyagraha, which spread across India in the 1970s, successfully forcing forestry reforms in Himalayan regions. I knew nothing of that etymology. I was referring only to the more commonly used derogatory sense of the label, meaning '*some dazed hippie who goes around giving hugs to trees as a way to connect with nature*' (Farrell, 2012). Because that's what tree huggers are, right?

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I grew up in a 'no-nonsense' largely atheist, largely working-class town in the North of England. In this community, you went to school, then you went to work. You worked hard to feed your family. When you were sick, you went to the doctor. When you died, you were dead. That was that. *Call a spade a shovel and be damned.* Of course, that is a somewhat simplistic, stereotypical and unfair depiction of a complex, multi-layered community, but it does speak to my childhood experiences.

As a teenager, I felt most at home with the ‘indie kids’, listening to The Smiths, The Cure and Echo & The Bunnymen. I joined Greenpeace (my now 30-odd-year-old ‘sailboats not whale boats’ smock is still a regularly worn wardrobe favourite) and, with a full head of hair and a wispy beard (now the other way around!), I was vegetarian by the time I was 18 years old.



In that time and place, remaining true to my convictions wasn’t always easy. I recall, by way of just one example, being challenged in a very angry and rather abusive way while fronting a Greenpeace stall in my local town centre. As one man pointed out, the local communities were almost entirely dependent on coal mining at that time. What’s more, we had obviously travelled to town in a petrol burning car, which in this man’s assessment made us ‘stupid bloody hypocrites’; points no less germane for the profanity in which they were offered.

It is the validity of these arguments, rather than the man’s abusiveness, which has stayed with me. My maternal grandfather was a coal miner. My paternal grandfather a steel worker. My father worked most of his adult life for a polythene manufacturer. My tertiary education, a privilege I was extremely lucky to benefit from, not to mention my childhood home, clothes and the food on my plate, were all paid for through industries that are amongst the most environmentally harmful. How do I promote environmental awareness today, without implied contempt for my immediate ancestors; beautiful, hard-working men and women doing no more and no less than their best for their families? And how do I live with the hypocrisy of certain lifestyle choices (I drive a car most days of the week) that are not fully congruent with the values I espouse? These are some of the challenges; questions that ecopsychologists cannot simply dodge.

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Fairly early in the workshop, we were sent outside in solo reflection and it wasn’t long before I encountered an Oak Tree. I smiled as I said out loud: ‘Come on then, let’s get it over with’ and lunged forward, arms outstretched.



It was an altogether unsatisfactory affair. The Oak didn't soften to my embrace or sway in my arms. I got no sense of being hugged back. In fact, I felt rejected, not least by the very unpleasant sensation of getting a small splinter of bark in my eye.

I have always loved hugs, both in the giving and receiving, and my 'bear hugs' have something of a small, favourable reputation amongst some of my social groups. Of course, I know better than to go around hugging people just because I might feel like it. I would never hug a person without first checking with the recipient whether my physicality would be welcome. However, until that moment, it had never occurred to me that a tree might also choose not to acquiesce.

Anthropocentrism in action!

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I don't believe that in a past life I was one of the 363 Bishnoi villagers. In this life, my Greenpeace activity never stretched to positioning myself in a dinghy between whales and harpoons. I wasn't at the silent protest at the Ringaskiddy incinerator site, which threatens my adoptive home city of Cork and I haven't (yet) locked-on at the Preston New Road fracking site, which threatens the land where I was raised. My activism has tended to be more indirect and reflective in its expression. It has been in my efforts to live my personal life in accordance with my values and, over the last 10 years or so, it has also been in my professional engagement with ecopsychology and my commitment to practising congruent, ecologically attuned psychotherapy.

My approach to ecopsychology is non-directive in the usual psychotherapeutic understanding of that term and it requires no prescribed values or specific behaviours from clients. I continue to work with whatever my clients bring to therapy in the same existentially informed way that I always have; with an understanding that the ontic concerns of my clients are always also expressions of the ontological and with an ear attuned to process as much as to content. In line with my *Wild Therapy* (an ecotherapeutic approach pioneered by Nick Totton) training, I take psychotherapy outside into the wild and bring wildness into psychotherapy. I also offer training to therapists interested in this way of working.



In developing a therapeutic approach which properly locates the human *psyche* (soul/breath) in its *eco* (home) – i.e. the other-than-human 'natural' world – I advocate an approach which views no separation between, for example, the individual grief for the death of a loved one and the collective grief for the destruction of our planet; an approach which recognises that

healing one is at once also healing the other. I try to remain open to grief, and fury, and rage, and despair, and sorrow, and hopelessness (and also to joy, and ecstasy, and hopefulness and determination). To the absolute best of my ability, I withstand individual ontic expressions of the collective ontological. I witness them, allow them and respond to them in the kindest, most connected and most healing ways that I can.

The more I engage in this work, the more I become aware that ecologically attuned psychotherapy is a powerful form of environmental activism. This type of ‘tree hugging’ does not require anyone to physically hug trees, although from time to time it might happen spontaneously as part of the therapeutic process.

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On the final morning of the workshop, Nick invited us to give ourselves a name. A name to reflect something that emerged for us during the weekend. I took this to mean not quite an ordained ecopsychology name, but something in that direction. I had gained so much personal development from the weekend that several possible names emerged. But one, of course, stood out from the rest. I had overcome some of my conditioning, I had allowed myself to experience the reciprocal healing potential of human-nature connectedness, I was firmly on the path of becoming an ecopsychologist and I had even tried to hug a tree!

My name? From that moment, I was ‘Tree-Hugger Henson’. Of course I was. Who else could I be? *So, say it once and say it loud...*

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Thank you for taking the time to read this little biographical piece. For ecopsychology resources, including details of workshops and the *Wild Therapy Ireland* training programme, please visit: [www.matthewhenson.ie](http://www.matthewhenson.ie).

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