

**The Problem of Painlessness:
Why Deep Ecology Won't Work Without a Willingness to Feel**

by Alf Seegert (4/2003)

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.
—Kahlil Gibran

Pain *hurts*. As a result we try to avoid it, and when we talk about the problem of pain our goal is generally to find a better way to get rid of it. I would like to try something different here by instead considering *the problem of painlessness*. What happens to ourselves and to the world when we close ourselves off from the experience of painful feedback? (*Be warned: the following example is not pleasant to listen to, but it is I think necessary in order to show the seriousness of the problem.*)

In his book The Gift Nobody Wants, Dr. Paul Brand relates the following true story. Tanya, a seventeen-month old girl, was left alone in her playpen laughing and playing while her mother cooked in the kitchen. A few minutes later the mother walked into Tanya's room to find her daughter "fingerpainting red swirls on the white plastic sheet." The mother didn't understand where the paint came from at first, but when she did she screamed. The little girl's fingertip was mangled and bleeding. Tanya had bitten off the tip of her finger and was now using it as a plaything for making designs with her own blood on the sheets.

Dr. Brand discovered that Tanya felt no discomfort in performing such a self-mutilating behavior because of a rare genetic defect that rendered her indifferent to pain. Although Tanya's parents did what they could to keep their daughter from biting off the tips of her fingers, no pleading seemed to work, and even spankings only induced laughter. When Tanya twisted an ankle, she didn't limp; instead she only twisted the limb further and further. By the time she was

eleven years old, Tanya had lost both legs from amputation, as well as most of her fingers. Both elbows were dislocated and her tongue, which she chewed constantly, was lacerated.

This grim and startling picture would strike many of us as unfathomably painful. The irony here, however, is that this kind of intense, self-destructive suffering occurs only in a life where physical pain is *absent*.

At this point you may be wondering if you have walked into the wrong session or you might be asking yourself how this gruesome anecdote could possibly have anything to do with environmental philosophy or deep ecology. Bear with me. I use the story of Tanya because it provides a harsh and instructive example of how our sense of self, our capacity for pain, and our responsiveness to injury are all intertwined. Tanya's self-mutilating behavior hints that how we *experience* ourselves has no small effect on how we take care of that which we call "self" in the first place. Such a claim is at the heart of deep ecology's notion of the *relational* or *ecological* Self.

Proponents of deep ecology, for instance, argue that a truncated sense of self goes hand in hand with ecological devastation. They contend that our present environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis not of ethics but of perception, where we narrowly and mistakenly identify ourselves with our particle-like egos. Doing so introduces a subject/object split between the human and the more-than-human world that is not only illusory, but also dangerous. By conceiving nature as "radically other" and separate, we instrumentalize it and consign it to "thinghood," thereby reducing the more-than-human-world to the status of raw material valuable only in terms of its use. The perhaps unsurprising consequence of such an isolated, dualistic sense of self is an ecological holocaust unrivaled by anything that the planet has seen for over 65 million years.

But there is a way to get around what Alan Watts called “The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are.” Instead of identifying ourselves as narrow, particle-like substances, we can undergo an ontological shift that allows us to “identify widely” with our ecological context. In such a view we come to recognize that interactions with things outside our bodies are not merely relationships that we *have*, but are in fact what make us who we fundamentally *are*. This is to say that we are more than just our bodies; we exist as the intersection of countless interactions with our fellow beings, with the air and water, with the ecosystems that sustain us, and ultimately with our planet and the cosmos. Every time you gulp down a mouthful of water or suck in a lungful of air, your body absorbs and assimilates a new set of particles; you become your environment. Exhale, perspire, take a pee; your environment becomes you. Or, as deep ecologists might put it, the environment was part of your wider identity all along.

According to Arne Naess, deep ecology’s founding philosopher, the result of “identifying widely” is that you will spontaneously behave in an Earth-friendly manner because the Earth is understood to be part of your wider Self (that’s “Self” with a capital “S”). This is to say that if you experience your “Self” as including the biosphere, you won’t need to be moralized or legislated into not injuring the planet, because you will instinctively take care of what you perceive to be part of *who you are*.

And this is where the significance of pain enters the picture. In his work with lepers, Dr. Brand discovered that because they felt no pain in their extremities, people suffering from leprosy would (like Tanya) use their bodies to perform acts that bodies are simply not intended to perform. He relates how one leper would retrieve food cooked in hot coals with his bare hands (his hands were just suppurating knobs at this point, really) *because he didn’t feel himself being burned*. Dr. Brand lectured the man about how important it was to take care of his hands, but the

man didn't seem to care. He encountered another leper who was running—seemingly unaware—on a badly dislocated ankle. Such cases were typical of Brand's experience with leprosy, and they had in common what Brand called “an utter nonchalance toward self-destruction.”

But why? Why do Tanya and the lepers of whom Brand speaks behave in a manner that is so deliberately self-mutilating? I think that the reason is because they do not construe their behaviors as mutilations of *themselves* at all, for the mental distinction we make between self and other is grounded most basically in our physical sensations. Lacking the experience of pain in their limbs, the lepers and Tanya understood their own hands and feet and even their entire bodies as Other. Because no pain registered for her, the little girl Tanya perceived her own fingers as objects to be manipulated at will—as things separate from herself—and not as parts of her own precious being.

I believe that the same mechanisms are at work in how we as human beings interact with the planet. Like lepers, we express an “utter nonchalance” toward global self-destruction because our nerve endings terminate at the skin and we allow our self-identification to (for the most part) stop there; we therefore don't experience the feedback necessary to recognize and respond to the damage that we are doing to our wider, ecosystemic Self. Like Tanya, who used her own bloody fingers as paints, we continue as a species to channel and dam our rivers, pour toxins into our air and water, reduce our agricultural land to asphalt, and wantonly cut our forests, all the while not recognizing that it is ourselves that we destroy. We mangle our world as Tanya did her fingertips, not because we are evil people (usually), but simply because we misperceive where our selves start and end. As ecological pioneer Aldo Leopold put it, “We only grieve for what we know.”

Because the capacity for experiencing feedback is critical in determining what we

experience as "self," it would appear that a necessary condition for global healing is that we go beyond the skin and somehow extend the reach of our nervous systems. For we will only *treat* as self what we *experience* as self. We therefore need to be willing and able to feel the pain of the world as our own pain and to embrace the earth's joy as our joy—in order that we can respond to suffering with healing, and respond to healing with celebration. But how do we achieve this?

There are, of course, many ways to answer this question—but I think there is a lot of room for *hope* in this respect. One thing often overlooked in deep ecology is how we already tend to identify more widely than we might initially think. When someone we love rejoices, we are overcome with sympathetic delight; when a loved one is suffering, we feel pain involuntarily; *our own self* has been afflicted whether we like it or not. We *already* identify ourselves not just in terms of our bodies but also in terms of our interactions, our loves, our aspirations, our frustrations, our joys and sorrows. I have played a game with college students—a variation of the "Dating Game," actually—where I ask students to tell me three things about themselves. They characteristically respond by telling me about their family, their favorite sport, the musical instrument they play, where they live, fun they have with their pets, or the places they like to visit in their spare time. *All these means of self-identification involve relationships with things external to one's body.* Not once have I heard a student identify herself as a hairless biped, as a rational animal, or in terms of her binocular vision or blood type. I don't mean to say that this counts as a scientific survey or that we never identify in terms specific to our bodies; but I think it is actually characteristic to invoke relationships beyond the skin when conceiving who we are. Our nerves already reach well beyond our fingertips. Thus I would argue that realizing our ecological selves by "widely identifying" is not different *in kind* from what we already do regularly. It is only different in *degree*.

Making the transition from *ego-* to *eco-*consciousness is, however, not a *logical* but a *psychological* procedure—and a difficult one. In our techno-savvy culture we are so primed to eliminate pain and discomfort that we rarely question why we're experiencing it in the first place. Think how we unreflectively pop a pill when we feel a headache coming on. How we clearcut our forests but divorce this fact from our awareness by leaving thin “buffer-strips” of trees in place along roads. Same story. But pain happens (usually) for a good reason, namely to protect each of us from injury: it combines *fact* with *value* in such a way that it can't merely be ignored. When your hand makes contact with boiling water, your body does not merely *inform* you of this fact; it instead ensures that you value such an experience so negatively that you remove your hand reflexively. Pain can therefore be a powerful ally; by creating suffering that demands an immediate response it provides the means for avoiding even greater suffering. Denying pain its power to speak is like putting masking tape over your car's oil light when it flashes on. It doesn't make the problem go away.

Of course, opening yourself to the experience of a wider range of feedback introduces a serious potential for overload. When you become existentially and not merely intellectually aware that you live in a world of wounds, the pain can be overwhelming. Take for instance the following catalog of dismay from David Orr:

If today is a typical day on planet earth, we will lose 116 square miles of rain forest, or about an acre a second. We will lose another 72 square miles to encroaching deserts, the results of human mismanagement and overpopulation. We will lose 40 to 250 species, and no one knows whether the number is 40 or 250. Today the human population will increase by 250,000. And today, we will add 2,700 tons of chlorofluorocarbons and 15 million tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. Tonight the earth will be a little hotter, its waters more acidic, and the fabric of life more threadbare. By year's end the numbers are staggering: The total loss of rain forest will equal an area the size of the state of Washington; expanding deserts will equal an area the size of West Virginia; and the global population will have risen by more than 90,000,000. (7)

Orr concludes by indicating that up to 1/5 of the life forms that existed on our planet in 1900 are now extinct (7). (*Have a nice day.*) Hearing these things can make us numb—it feels like too much to bear. Such awareness can lead to despair, a feeling that is as unhelpful as it is unpleasant.

And despite one's best attempts to *identify* widely, still one must *act* from within the finitude of a particular skin-encapsulated body in one particular place and time, and that's OK. Consequently, I think that a good place to start might just be in that clichéd, seemingly overused, and absolutely essential domain of particularized action: one's own backyard—which I mean both figuratively and literally. One of many ways to help deepen and widen your sense of self would be to interact concretely with your immediate ecological context, working to become intimately aware of your shared identity with it. For instance: *grow a garden; plant a tree; trace where the water in your tap finds its origin; say grace and mean it; volunteer in your neighborhood (or as an instructor, work with your class on service learning projects in the community); plant native species and other vegetation in your yard appropriate for your bioregion; follow the weather by looking up—not at a TV; wait expectantly for the hummingbirds to return this spring and greet them with beakers of sugarwater and flowers brimming with nectar; honor dates that the sky celebrates—solstices, new moons, full moons, equinoxes—not just holidays marked on human calendars; get out of your car and walk.*

One specific practice that has helped me to reconnect with the local landscape is ecological restoration. For over ten years the non-profit organization TreeUtah has worked with countless volunteers—many from the University of Utah Bennion Center—to restore critical migratory songbird habitat along the Jordan River in Salt Lake Valley. Their work planting trees not only helps restore ecosystems but also reconnects people with the land in such a way that

they feel it become a part of them, experience themselves as a part of it, and spontaneously come to its defense when it becomes threatened. This work of attempting to restore mangled ecosystems is an outer expression of our attempt to restore our own hearts. I still remember the jubilant expressions on children's faces at planting projects; they would often draw me aside to show me *that* tree, what they called "my tree," the tree *they* planted, the tree they would come back and take care of.

Deep ecology's goal is very basic, and it's far from new. Dozens of centuries ago the Oracle at Delphi urged one who sought wisdom there to "know thyself." But the "Self" that deep ecology argues to be both *real* and badly in need of being *realized* is a circuit of interactions that extends far beyond the "individually wrapped" egos that we too often mistake ourselves for. We are enmeshed in a web of relatedness with all life. To cut ourselves off, through denial, from this flow of relationship to our hearts is indeed to cut off the pain of the senseless destruction of other living beings. In doing so we not only enable such destruction to continue but we also, beyond that, doom ourselves to the frigid and numbing waters of isolation and alienation. In contrast, to reconnect our isolated selves to the larger unity of earth's ecology can indeed open us to the messengers of pain and so motivate us to care for the planet. And it can do more. Reconnection can also remove the painful chill of alienation and put within our reach the warmth and fulfillment of connectedness that our spirits hunger for. In nourishing life around us, we ourselves are nourished.

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(Not cited in the paper, but it's foundational to the project as a whole—it's an epic fantasy tale in which the hero—or anti-hero—is a leper thrown into another world where the health of the land enters directly into people's awareness. Lord Foul's Bane is Book I in The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever.)

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