

LISTENING TO EARTH: WRITING AN ECOLOGICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

- Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

When Henry David Thoreau “wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life,” he didn’t register for a university class nor did he join a book discussion group. What he did, instead, was to go to the woods “to see if I could not learn what it had to teach.” His motivation for learning was not to earn a degree or to make money, but rather to “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” Through his journal, Thoreau leaves a record of his life in the woods and shares insights on how he sought out the essence of what life has to offer. In one journal entry he wrote, “I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans.” We find, as we read further in his journals, that it was through hoeing beans, wading in the marshes, listening to the booming of the snipe, and smelling the whispering sedge that Thoreau arrived at deep understandings about life and the nature of who we are as human beings. He notes, “At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable.” This is just one example of the many insights Thoreau gained through his closeness to nature.

Most of us have moments when seeking the essential facts of life become very important to us. We begin asking deeper questions about the meaning of life and wonder about who and where

we are and how we ought to live. Some of us look to various religious traditions for guidance. Others search their own minds and souls through meditation and reflection. Still others use a more academic approach, turning to readings in philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and other related disciplines.

Thoreau’s decision to look to the woods for wisdom reflects a long-held belief that Earth, itself, can be a teacher. This belief has been articulated by people of various times and cultures, but seems to be overlooked by the mainstream of society today. We find that ideas on how to listen to nature and learn its lessons in today’s fast-paced and plastic world are rarely articulated. Perhaps it’s time to reflect on ways in which we can make “listening to Earth” a part of our search for wisdom and guidance.

The Ecological Autobiography As a Type of Vision Quest

While each one of us might use a different approach to hear the voice of Earth and learn its lessons, one particular approach that has proven helpful to some is writing an ecological autobiography. In an ecological autobiography, one tells the story of his or her personal experiences and relationship with nature over time. Most such autobiographies begin with childhood experiences and proceed to the present. The autobiography includes not only facts about remembered experiences,

but also insights and perceptions about the meaning of those experiences. Some autobiographies also include a discussion of specific themes or patterns which surface through reflecting on one's story.

The focus of an ecological autobiography is on the self in relation to the natural world. This aspect of one's self is sometimes referred to as "the ecological self." While the ecological self is considered to be an integral part of who we are, it represents an often-unexplored part of our identity. A major reason why people write their ecological autobiographies is to delve more deeply into the meaning and characteristics of their ecological self and to identify implications (or lessons) for their present and future direction.

While the process of developing an ecological autobiography calls for analysis and synthesis, the experience isn't as much of an intellectual exercise as it is an emotional journey – or a journey of the heart. The process might be thought of as a type of "vision quest" where an individual commits the time and energy to explore the wilderness of his or her own past experiences with the natural world to discover personal meaning and direction.

Individuals who have gone through the process of writing an ecological autobiography report very powerful and rewarding outcomes. Such outcomes include a deepened understanding about their relationship with the natural environment and a renewed commitment to live more harmoniously with the world of nature. Comments in their reports include: "It was good for my soul." "It hit me pretty hard." "It really moved me. I realize what my roots are and what I need to do in the future." "It helped me get in touch with my feelings for the environment." "This has helped me both to re-establish my commitment and to remind me of my duty towards the natural world." "The memories have shown me what is important to me."

Writing an Ecological Autobiography

Individuals interested in writing their ecological autobiography should first let go of the need to record everything they can remember about their experiences with the natural world. Such a record would, of course, be impossible. They should also keep in mind that the primary focus of an autobiography is on experiences versus facts. Specific dates or other details surrounding an event are not as important as the way in which the event was experienced and what it might have meant. An individual writing an ecological autobiography should spend time reflecting on the meaning or essence of nature-related experiences. They may find the following questions helpful in doing so.

What experiences with nature do I remember most vividly?

What about those experiences made them memorable?

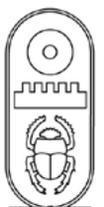
What special lessons or insights have I gained through these experiences?

Have nature-related experiences influenced any decisions I've made – possibly career decisions, decisions about where to live or where to vacation?

Another task of the autobiographer is to look for recurrent themes in his or her episodes in nature and insights gained through nature-related experiences. One autobiographer identified the following themes:

- => Earth isn't just something all around me; it's a part of me.
- => A priority of my life is to live simply and impart as little harm to Earth as possible.
- => I feel a deep emotional bonding with Earth

It's not unusual for autobiographers to identify shifts in their relationship with Earth over time. One individual who



was able to articulate the nature of these changes wrote the following entry in her journal: “Changes in my relationship with nature have moved from idle curiosity to action; from playing in nature to learning from it; from seeing nature around me to seeing nature as part of me.”

A New Way of Being in the World

Developing an ecological autobiography can be a complex, challenging, and rewarding process. During the process, development occurs not only with the written document, but within the individual, as well. The development within the individual tends to be from simple introspection to self-understanding, and then to transformation. This transformation need not be limited to how one thinks, but may extend to one’s way of being in the world. A thoughtful analysis of ecological autobiographies may also reveal valuable insights, which go beyond the individual. Such insights may pertain to the whole of society, giving us direction for a more positive collective future.

A prayer shared at a United Nations Environmental Sabbath Program addressed the concern of how we have forgotten who we are and how, because of this forgetfulness, we have become estranged from the movements of Earth. The prayer is:

We have forgotten who we are.

We have alienated ourselves from
the unfolding of the cosmos
We have become estranged from
the movements of the earth
We have turned our backs on the
cycles of life.

We have forgotten who we are.

We have sought only our own
security
We have exploited simply for our
own ends

We have distorted our knowledge
We have abused our power

We have forgotten who we are.

Now the land is barren
And the waters are poisoned
And the air is polluted.

We have forgotten who we are.

Now the forests are dying
And the creatures are disappearing
And humans are despairing.

We have forgotten who we are.

We ask forgiveness
We ask for the gift of remembering
We ask for the strength to change

We have forgotten who we are.

The prayer acknowledges our wrongdoing – recognizing that we have abused our power and exploited simply for our own ends. The result, as articulated in this prayer, is that the land is now barren, the waters are poisoned, and the air is polluted. Finally, through this prayer, we ask for forgiveness and the strength to change.

The ecological autobiography can be one approach we might use to help us through the change process. It can be a tool to help us listen to Earth as our teacher.

*Quoted from the U.N. Environmental Sabbath Program, in *Earth Prayers*, eds. Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 70-71.

Note: All quotations from ecological autobiographies and related reports are from students or workshop participants engaged in writing their ecological autobiographies under the direction of the author, Ruth Wilson.