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jacob Kaminker

John F Kennedy School of Psychology, National University, San Diego, CA, USA

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Wildfire and Asylum:
A Terrapsychological Approach
to Backyard Pilgrimage

Jacob Kaminker, PhD
John F Kennedy School of Psychology, National University
San Diego, CA, USA

This paper offers a conceptual framework and embodied practice of finding ones’ psychological roots through mythological re-emplacement. The author utilizes the lenses of depth psychology, terrapsychology, ritual and pilgrimage. The method also focuses on experiences of awe in nature as a catalyst for transpersonal experience. This deeply personal account offers a model for the reader's own symbolic engagement with the physical, natural and historically rich world around them.

Keywords: Terrapsychology, ecopsychology, depth psychology, Jung, psychology of place, ritual, pilgrimage, transpersonal, nature, awe

We find ourselves in a modern world, largely displaced from our indigenous lands, and from the respect for nature that naturally flows from generations of this relationship (Adams, 2010). Faced with such a vast disconnection, it can be tempting to feel despair, as I have often heard my psychotherapy clients express (Rozak, et al., 1995). However, there are tools at our disposal to transform this relationship, for ourselves and for clients (Stier-Jarmer, et.al, 2021; Kotera, Richardson et al., 2020). Perhaps the most powerful transformative agent is the personal encounter with nature, with its ego-diluting potential, recognized in the literature of ecopsychology (Rozak, et al., 1995). In nature, we find an ideal setting for openness to beyond-ego experience. Furthermore, from an attitude of pilgrimage, as well as employing methods such as Jungian active imagination and depth psychology (Jung, 1963/1989), we can tap into the psychological power of intention, as well as inner guides (projected onto the contact with animals, plants, even imagined humans from the past, living a different world). In Chalquist (2007, 2020) and the terrapsychology literature, we find a blueprint for access to beyond-ego insights, meaning-making and psychospiritual transformation, as well as a focus on interiority, and the practice of mythopoetic re-emplacement into an inner safe haven.

Awe, a common experience in nature, is seen by existential psychologists as impacting
existential isolation in sometimes contradictory ways, but with the potential to foster feelings of connectedness through certain pathways (Edwards et al., 2023; Schneider, 2008). The feelings of awe/gratitude, according to one pandemic-era study, was associated with positive experiences of nature and spirituality, relationships, and well being (Büssing et al, 2021).

Nature is everywhere, even in major urban areas. A small city park, even a single tree with leaves blowing in the wind, a city pigeon, a dandelion growing up through cracks in the concrete, with appropriate attention, can be a catalyst for a call to presence, an awareness of beauty, and a shift in psychospiritual state. The power of such practices of emplacement has been demonstrated even in the most marginalized neighborhoods (Anguelovski, 2013). Nature is a perfect projection screen for this automatic activity of the mind because, as Adams (2010) told us, “nature is infinitely more subtle, deep, wild, and free than our ego can ever fathom, much less command” (p. 48).

Nature primes us for transpersonal experiences and is a tool for getting beyond ego, to an expanded sense of self, of space and time, and connection to the world. As in all psychospiritual interfaces with great collective forces, nature inspires both awe and dread, from the transcendence of a sunrise to the fear in the face of a wildfire or pandemic. We might be expanded and transported by learning about the vast interconnectivity of ecosystems that surround us, or face existential dread when wrestling with the realities, and even inevitabilities of climate change.

Each seed one plants, if sufficiently cared for, will grow, transforming nutrients into food and beauty, each sapling may grow for decades, until it becomes an old tree, stops fruiting, and rots apart, limb by limb. Each season, wildflowers bloom on the hillsides in successive waves of color, transforming in theme over millennia, spurred by changing climate and natural selection, growing progressively more homogenous in flora and fauna as species die and ecosystems degrade. In our lifetime, we may very well watch these ecosystems collapse and nostalgically recall greener pastures and calmer storms.

Chalquist (2007) wrote that,

In terrapsychology done well, the pathological stance of [human] against the elements gives way to a disciplined willingness to be mentored by them—interaction by heartfelt interaction - without splitting the metaphoric from the tangible or the imaginal from the physical (p. 44).

These ideas are far from new. To the contrary, they are consistent with many traditions, across cultures and through history, including the animism of Native American traditions, indigenous African traditions, and the Greek and Roman spirits of place (Chalquist, 2020).

This perspective requires the imagination to understand oneself in a much broader historical context. This same broad context can help one to understand one’s collective trauma and/or privilege in the history of colonization and oppressive societal structures. Municipalities need to think this way in making their 30-year plans, creating the future through their science fiction daydreams. Which corridors will be designated for public transportation? For shopping districts? What environmental implications must be considered? The zoning laws that are made now have ripple effects for the future.

What stories are hidden in the surrounding landscape? What messages do the indigenous people have to share? What lives have come and gone, and what were their struggles? What can be learned about oneself through one’s relationship to these ancestors? How will future generations understand my story, and my stewardship of this sacred land?

Pilgrimage

Another valuable approach to seeking insight in nature or offering ritual to clients is through the lens of pilgrimage, which has historically been framed as requiring a spiritually-oriented retreat to a place of significance that is contrary to daily life (Turner & Turner, 1978). More recent literature has acknowledged that such practices are also beneficial when more integrated into daily life than had been previously understood, including Wigley (2016),
who framed regular church attendance as a form of pilgrimage, and tells us that “habitually walking to the church on a Sunday offers an opportunity for a break from an otherwise fast pace of life and events for many urban-dwellers and hence promotes an alternative psychological approach to part of the socio-economic schedule” (p. 704).

For the purposes of this paper, let us imagine that this pilgrimage can also be to a place in nature, potentially of unique importance to each individual. From the stance of openness found in experiences of nature, we have a perfect foundation to inquire and seek insight. Such a search often benefits from intention. In the ancient Greek cult of Asclepius, incubating dreams of healing was a common practice in which people would set an intention and wait for the healing dream (Panagiotidou, 2006). While, from a cognitive perspective, this has been framed this as a placebo effect (Panagiotidou, 2006), it has been argued that Freud was aware of Asclepius practices and may have intentionally incorporated elements from this tradition into his development of psychoanalysis (Kool, 2015). Similar practices can be found everywhere from shamanic traditions to modern dreamwork (Hagood, 2006) and even in the practice of hypnotic suggestion. To Warfield et. al.,

Pilgrimage provides the opportunity to co-create one’s existence and to co-create with a power outside of ourselves. The therapeutic nature of the pilgrimage journey begins when the commitment is made, continues throughout the journey, and is integrated upon the return. (2014, p. 873).

Duda and Doburżyński (2019) differentiated religious tourism from pilgrimage by the experience of “sacredness,” and pointed out that pilgrimage generally focuses on culturally designated “holy places” and labels these places as “sacred” vs. “profane” (p. 3). In contrast, I am suggesting a personal ascription of sacredness to a place, in a way that is not culturally-designated, but rather stemming from a combination of individual experience and intention.

They (Duda & Doburżyński, 2019) wrote that “there are even views that clearly separate the essence of the journey itself (as a form of profanum, necessary to achieve the sacrum) from the purpose of the journey, which is to commune with holiness” (p. 3). Here they acknowledged the role of purpose, even in the traditional model of pilgrimage. Purpose then, applied to an conscious approach and entry to a place in nature, seems to be an important factor of the pilgrimage.

There is an increasing acknowledgement in the literature “of the continuities and intertwining of the sacred and secular within the time-space of pilgrimage” and that a “spectrum, rather than a binary, between these two poles would be more appropriate” (Wigley, 2006 pp. 695–696). These conclusions have been reinforced by Wigley’s (2006) own mixed methods study that framed church attendance as a form of pilgrimage.

Many mythologies, particularly from indigenous traditions, orient themselves by their mountains, rivers, and streams. Similarly, in the Abrahamic religions, for milenia, there has been a mythology of place around the “sacred” land. This region has been viewed as both mythic and physical, holding both historical and symbolic value. Since ancient times, pilgrims could come to Jerusalem, seeking transformation through approaching the Temple, the Holy of Holies. This place would represent to these adherents the center of mystery and grace. Through a psychological lens, this land contains locations that may represent regions of the unconscious that can be interacted with through intention and pilgrimage.

Competing claims to holy ground, competing utopic visions, and tribalism have led to untold conflict, violence, displacement, abuses of human rights, and intergenerational trauma. Even today, this place is seen as literal holy ground by many. To others, it may represent a symbolic inner sense of homeland, and wandering in the desert, an existential exile. Jerusalem could hereby be a sought-after state of mind, a feeling of being at home, and a return to the moment, without longing or desire. During the Passover Seder, Jews say “next year in Jerusalem.” Next year, we will get back in touch with ourselves. There is hope to sustain us through this anxiety, through this exile from ourselves, from a feeling of disconnection and groundlessness.

Terrapsychological Approach to Backyard Pilgrimage
Can we find this sense of holiness wherever we happen to live, in our own private diaspora? Can we re-emplace, re-mythologize, re-indigenize, in spite of our ancestral stories and displacements? Can we find our personal connection to the land, and locate our personal mythology in physical form, to be interacted with, engaged, and explored? Can we find an inner sense of home?

Re-Emplacement

From the perspective of his terrapsychology, Chalquist (2020) emphasized a conscious engagement with our psychological projections on the world around us. This relies on his concept of interiority “inwardness, subjectivity, [and] inner life” in relationship to nature (Chalquist, 2007, p. 48). At some point in our ancestry, we all had tribal lands, which our predecessors knew like their own inner landscape. They had an intimacy with the plants and animals that was necessary to survive, with knowledge passed down through generations. They had mythologies of place, with inner symbolism in deep conversation with outer. Whether as immigrants, slaves, or refugees, we are now largely displaced. Chalquist (2007) called for a mythic “re-emplacement.”

Of course such a “re-emplacement” could never fully heal the wounds of indigenous displacement. In fact, that very displacement, and the resulting longing for home, can be said to now become part of the cultural and even personal mythology for each individual, as it is in my own Jewish tradition. However, we might think of this practice as a kind of de-colonization, reclaiming a symbolism of place that is lost to most of us who, through colonization, enslavement, or migration, have lost our inner sense of home. My own family came to the United States as refugees, after many generations in diaspora. These displacements take their psychological toll through intergenerational trauma.

Additionally, the very existence of such mythologies of place, found in cultures all over the world, seems to speak to an inherent human drive towards a mythology of place, as if it is a “necessary activity of the psyche,” as James Hillman (1977, p. xii) described psychology in general. Perhaps such a re-emplacement can help in some way to re-introduce to the displaced psyche this longed-for laying down of psychological roots.

In his autobiography, Carl Jung (1963/1989) described sitting on a rock and contemplating his own identity, expanding his awareness of himself in space and time into a burgeoning concept of the dichotomy between ego and Self. In my own youth, I had a similar experience with my “thinking tree,” under which I imagined my own branches reaching up into the sky and my roots digging deep into the earth. I regularly visited this tree for insight and reflection. It became a place to call my own, a safe haven, and the center of my universe.

Guides

But how can we listen, and hear the voices of nature around us? One tool to channel wisdom from the amorphous soup of the unconscious is finding inner or outer guides. For some of us, it may be easy to listen to the plants and animals. For others, it may help to have a more relatable guide. Pilgrims often use guides. Social anthropologist Jörgen Hellman (2019) discussed the co-collaborative creative process as a “productive complicity” (p. 46) in a shared meaning-making of pilgrim and pilgrimage guide.

There is also much to be gleaned from the depth psychological literature on the nature of inner guides. James Hillman (1977), founder of the post-Jungian field of archetypal psychology, pointed out that, like the Greeks and Romans, we can personify qualities in such a way that they can become inner guides to those qualities. “Personifying,” Hillman (1977) told us “not only aids discrimination, it offers another avenue of loving, of imagining things in a personal form so that we can find access to them within our hearts” (p. 14). Additionally, “personifying emotionalizes, shifts the discussion from nominalism to imagination, from head to heart” (p. 14). These guides are often a feature of active imagination and can guide us towards what I have called non-egoic intelligence. Guides, through the darkness of the unknown, can hereby be seen as the delegation of will to an archetype, a non-egoic intelligence, so that something can emerge that is surprising to our egoic identity.

Dr. Belgum, historical guide
To bring this practice alive, I invite you to join me in hills above my home in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area. Here, we find, hidden among the vegetation, the ruins of Dr. Hendrick Belgum’s Grande Vista Sanitarium. This is a place that is sacred to me, a place where I go to seek insight. Dr. Belgum is, to me, in one sense a historical figure, in another sense, a contemplation of mortality and a Jungian Self symbol; and in another sense, a vantage point from which to view a wider sense of myself in time.

This last aspect yields great potential for beyond-ego states and insights, including, through the eyes of several generations before my own, prior to the industrial revolution, locomotives and skyscrapers, offer a meditation on the human impact on my local ecosystem.

Dr. Belgum spent the first half of the last century treating patients on this land. He must have watched the world changing around him, from the last gasps of America’s Wild West, through the building of the Golden Gate bridge in the 1930’s, which he could have watched from his hilltop overlooking the Bay, through watching WWII naval ships heading towards the South Pacific under that very bridge, until he ultimately died fighting off wildfires that threatened the home.

According to one local historian:

As years went by, the doctor himself grew more and more eccentric and reclusive, preferring the company of his patients to that of the people he met on his expeditions into town. Neighbor children brave enough to sneak up to the mansion reported being spellbound by strains of enchanting music cascading down the hillside. It was said that the doctor and his ethereal sisters enjoyed dancing with the patients as the setting sun would cast its golden glow across the bay below them. (Friscovista, 2007).

I first stumbled upon this place by accident, this place where Dr. Belgum conducted his life’s work and gasped his last breath. There was an eerie, sacred, and forbidden feeling to the non-indigenous palm trees blossoming out of an indigenous oak grove. But from these first cautious steps into his home, a deepening conversation has emerged.

When I talk to my inner Dr. Belgum, I talk to myself 100 years after a life I do not yet know, once my legacy is sealed, no story left to tell. But now, through my archeological expeditions, Dr. Belgum’s story is still being told. For me, Dr. Belgum is a senex archetype, a wise elder, but an imperfect one, one fueled by passion and frenzy, one that submits to wild abandon.

Before the construction of TransAmerica Pyramid and Sutro Tower, the San Francisco skyline would have been barely visible on the horizon across the Bay, but from here, Dr. Belgum must have watched the sun set behind the southern tower of the Golden Gate bridge as it was built over several years in the 1930’s, and strung with cables, its right tower hidden from his view behind Angel Island. He would have been here for nearly 20 years when construction began and over 10 years after construction was complete.

What did that mean to Dr. Belgum, to see San Francisco open up to the North Bay, a quick trip by automobile, instead of a ferry crossing? From here, in my time, I have watched the finishing touches on the Salesforce building, now the tallest building in San Francisco. As the skyline continues to grow, what features will those who come after me take for granted?

All things are in process, unfolding. Eventually the fence around my yard, my windows and walls, will all turn to dust, and all that will be left may be the foundation of my own crawlspace, just like Dr. Belgum’s house.

Recently, I carried my toddler son in a backpack, to visit Dr. Belgum. This place is part of my legacy to him, a place where he can always visit me. Through my wife, Camille, he is the fourth generation in our neighborhood. She was baptized just down the street in a mission style church that was founded in 1864 and much of her family is buried in the cemetery nearby. Through her, he has access to some deep roots in this place.

Laying Down Psychological Roots in Psychotherapy

When there is insufficient building of an inner sense of home, when there has been a significant trauma, displacement, loss, or in
marginalized communities, the safe haven can be disrupted (Anguelovski, 2013). Attachment theory describes how the caregiver can help to foster an inner safe haven through the development of a sense of self (Bowlby, 1973). As Chalquist (2020) told us, the landscape can be an effective metaphor for self and finding meaning in the landscape can be a process of laying down psychological roots finding a sense of home in response to diaspora and exile.

This principle can, for example, help a client to move through grief. Some of the first archeological evidence of civilization comes in the form of burial rituals (Humphrey, 2021). Since time immemorial, humans have used gravesites, the metaphor of physical space to symbolize and even visit with deceased loved ones. Whether a client is drawn to visit an actual gravesite or a place of meaning and significance to the loved one or the relationship, the embodied visit to such a place can help in the processing of grief, and in the seeking of insight from the part of oneself integrated from the deceased loved one. In the film, The Electrical Life of Louis Wain, a biopic of the British artist of the same name, Louis’ wife Emily is dying of cancer. They visit the same woods, day after day, throughout all four seasons. Soon before Emily’s passing, the couple sits looking out on these woods. Louis reports, “Electricity. I feel electricity. Can you feel it?” Emily replies “This is our place. This is where I’ll be, Louie, when you need me” (Sharpe, 2021). Louis here is acknowledging the role of what Jung (1963/1989) called the numinous, the subjective and transcendent feeling of meaning and significance. Emily is acknowledging the power of a physical place where Louis can visit her after her passing. She is offering him psychological roots.

I have witnessed clients find similar significance in the gravesites of loved ones, or in places where they visit parts of themselves, seeking clarity and insight. I have watched people quell their restlessness as they find a sense of home within, through the exploration of their relationship to their physical surroundings. In these backyard pilgrimages, people seek their very selves in the landscape around them, and they come back with untold riches.

References


**About the Author**

*Jacob Kaminker, PhD,* is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist in the State of California (PSY 26445). In addition to seeing clients in his Berkeley, CA private practice, Jacob is a Professor and former Chair of the Master’s in Counseling Psychology at the John F Kennedy College of Psychology at National University. Formerly, he was Chair of Holistic Counseling Psychology at John F. Kennedy University (JFKU), Founding Director of the Depth Psychotherapy Program and Director of the Expressive Arts Therapy Program at JFKU. He has sat on the Board of Directors for the Association of Transpersonal Psychology and the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association, and is a Past President of the San Francisco Psychological Association.

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