

# **Soul and Nature: The two lost lovers from the land of Tír na nÓg**

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## **Abstract**

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This essay explores how loss and grief can shape the narrative of our relationship with nature. The author recounts an experience of a five-day walking and wild camping immersive wilderness experience in the highlands of Scotland, which provided an opportunity for reflections and musings on the theory and practice of ecopsychology. Story telling and narrative therapy are explored in the context of attachment and a comparison is made between the mythic land of eternal youth, Tír na nÓg, and the personal experiences of our deep brain attachment narratives. The author documents his evolving worldview from a biologist to Systemic Family Therapist. A journey from a knowledge based Darwinian evolutionary perspective to more imaginal or depth psychology perspective as a result of the training as a therapist and the influence of the work of Stephen Foster and Meredith Little, Bill Plotkin and Henry Corbin. The piece concludes with a description of ‘Soul encounter’ or wilderness experience as an embodied transpersonal encounter of nature outside of a Cartesian paradigm. The author suggest that this experience is one of the core practices in the emerging field of ecopsychology.

**Keywords:** soul encounter, wilderness experience, loss, grief, imaginal

## **The journey**

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Autumn, the time of nature’s descent and a time of change for me. After changing my job and the completion of some personal and professional work, I feel the pull to touch-in with some wild nature. I call my friend Alun and we hatch a plan: five days walking and wild camping on the west coast of Scotland. We begin to prepare, checking if we might need some new gear, the debate between cost and wealth versus age and comfort. Our bags are packed and we decide on an alpine start, leaving before first light, breakfast in the Lake District, lunch in Glasgow and camping on the hills at dusk. We sleep that night with roaring stags all around us, muffled by mist and the sound of running water.

Next morning giant, erratic boulders emerge out of the dawn like awaking trolls; some could be deer in the half-light, others people or unknown creatures. As the colour bleeds back into the land, they return from the mythic imagination and become just rock. They are covered in lichens, yellow grass tufts and flecks of mica as they fall back into sleep, dreaming of how they came to balance so precariously and yet remain unmoved for the last ten thousand years.

After breakfast we pack up and move down into a wide valley – here the rocks in the stonewalls of the old sheep enclosures and ruins are just young incomers compared to their erratic elders. But they still mark out human stories from past decades and centuries, and the whole landscape is rich with small fragments from human minds: rusty metal, sheets of tin, old farm implements, debris from previous camp fires and bivouacs. We cross the river and head up the other side of the next valley, stopping to fill our water bottles at a lone oak tree, balanced and poised by the stream, overlooking the expanding mountain lochan below.

Before leaving home I sent out a strong intent to see an otter or maybe find some signs or something more. I am on the lookout for them as we go, as otters are frequent travellers in this part of the world, leaving their spraints or droppings on path side boulders, twisted, smelly and speckled with fish scales. In my adolescence I studied the ecology of British mammals with the intensity of a love affair and still have an uncanny skill to pick up hidden signs, particularly bones and skulls. I have collected skulls, bones and skins of animals for decades and tanned, over the years, skins of almost all the British mammals, usually from road kill. Foxes, badgers, squirrels and hares, each find accompanied by an intensity of feeling I can still remember. In those days when even seeing signs of an otter was very rare, finding an intact otter skull was something of a holy grail. A couple of years ago, after my mother's death, I drove alone up to the west coast. I drove all day and most of the night, eventually bivouacking in the dunes at Sandwood bay, but its beauty was lost on me. I was carrying in my belly a ball of grief as heavy as a sea worn boulder; it fitted the inside of my stomach perfectly, too heavy and slippery to lift, too solid to digest. On that trip while I was passing through the Cairngorms I found my first road kill otter after more than thirty years of searching. The otter was freshly killed and perfectly intact with a beautiful pelt, although the skull was smashed. I skinned it on the strand line of a small rocky west coast beach and buried the body under the seaweed. Back home, I tanned the skin carefully, proud of my find and achievements, but that feeling was not to last. A rat found it and chewed through the skin and in doing so punctured the container of my grief, putting me in touch with a

sense of uncontainable loss although the tears were not able to come until years later. Robert Romanyshyn (1999) makes a connection between grief and synchronistic events. He describes from his own experience how grief can “break open the shell of isolation which hardens the heart” and allow the ordinary separation between Soul and nature to collapse so we can experience moments of synchronicity. What I had thought was to be the end of my otter story was in fact only a passing episode in an evolving narrative, called to my attention by a rat.

## **Storying the world**

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Over the sea from where we were camping, on the Isle of Skye, lives a storyteller. The last of a long line of storytellers, he learnt stories from his grandfather who insisted that they be word perfect. Stories of factual events passed down by word of mouth, much like the stories that hold the narratives and identifies of pre-technological indigenous culture. These are stories of the land and accounts of historical events told and retold, with a direct lineage to the people who first recounted the experience. He told stories of the Vikings and Celtic warriors and their meeting, the warring and eventual assimilation of these two very different cultures. Older still, were stories of the coming of the Pictish clans. Even older were accounts of the ancient warriors and heroes from Ireland, and here the boundaries between the earthly and the numinous become indistinct. Ossian follows his lover to the land of Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth where he lived outside of earthly time with his fairy bride. This is a land where time runs at a different pace, and the threshold between the two worlds needs to be negotiated with care. Ossian makes a fatal error when he returns and alights from his horse to help some men moving a boulder. Touching the physical world reconnects him with his true earthly age and turns him into an old man who dies on the spot. Scottish and Irish stories recount tales of Tír na nÓg as a fairy realm: an other world of haunting music, laughter and lost lovers, so close and yet just beyond our reach. This realm is beyond the veil and certainly outside the biological and psychological paradigm of our modern digital reality. It is a place for children and dreamers and not a place where the heroes of our age venture, if they value their careers. However, the Australian family therapist Michael White managed to forge a professional link between therapy and story telling (White & Epston, 1990). White had originally trained as an anthropologist and, inspired by the work of Gregory Bateson (1979), began to explore the effect of the telling of untold, lost or subjugated narrative as a therapeutic intervention.

Family therapist Rudy Dallas extended the framework of narrative therapy to include

attachment theory, to become attachment narrative therapy, the search for our attachment narratives and the stories of why we do and do not belong (Dallas, 2006). Martin Jordan (2009) widens the context of attachments beyond the human relationships to nature itself, an idea more usually associated with pre-industrial indigenous cultures. This more-than-human aspect of attachment has somehow slipped out of our contemporary psychological awareness, and with it a sense of belonging to nature. In their book *Reclaiming youth at risk*, Martin Brendtro and Larry Brokenleg (Brendtro, Brokenleg & van Brockern, 1990) write from the perspective of Native American Lakota culture and are able to articulate the importance of attachment relationship beyond the merely human connections. They describe a broader concept of attachment to include relationship to family, tribe, culture and nature:

All are related and one's actions impinge on the natural environment. Maintaining balanced ecological relationship is a way of ensuring balance in one own life (p. 47).

This sense of belonging is considered to be the starting point for building healthy human social relationships not only to each other but also to the Earth, and loss of this sense of belonging is identified as one sure route to social breakdown. It seems that changing our story can change how we face the future.

## **Attachment to wilderness**

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Over the sea and mountains a little further north up the west coast of Skye is one of remotest graveyard in the British Isles: the churchyard at Trumpan. This is the place where John Bowlby lies buried. Bowlby, psychologist and psychoanalyst, was the curmudgeonly 'father' of attachment theory, which he described as the making and breaking of affectional bonds. I have often wondered why Bowlby, with a life long interest in deep interpersonal experiences, chose to be buried in possibly one of Britain's wildest and remotest spots. Bowlby's work was based on his study of the influence of early maternal relationships and how this influences our capacity to maintain emotional connections in later life. We experience attachment relationship in our lives as falling in love and having our hearts broken, and these experiences can influence our intimate thoughts and behaviors and, in doing so, the course of our lives. The origin of these powerful emotional forces seems to exist beyond the reach of our conscious knowing. They emerge from deep within our mammalian and reptilian brain where they roam like dinosaurs from a lost world. At times of trauma these creatures burst through the floorboards of our rational day world and chew up

our best laid plans like cold bloodied puppies and then return to the depths. One of the tasks of psychotherapy is to begin to learn the language, habitat and ecology of these underworld demons. The land of deep brain pathways, like the land of Tír na nÓg, is a place where powerful images and patterns communicate with us.

## Soul and nature

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As a biologist and a systemic psychotherapist, I am interested in the emerging field of ecopsychology, a synthesis of the biological and psychological. Robert Romanyshyn describes how at the deepest layers of the unconscious “psyche and nature are not two but one” (Romanyshyn, 2007: 38). Here perhaps the creatures and patterns of this underworld exist in a psychic ecosystem that can communicate with the earthly ecosystem and all its living creatures. We can sometimes touch this realm through prolonged exposure to nature’s clear but un-languaged narratives, such as wilderness experience, and this is now well documented as having psychological and cultural benefits. For example, Jo Barton and her colleagues at the University of Essex have reviewed the effect of wilderness experience on a range of different youth groups (Hines, Pretty & Barton, 2009) and Joanna Bettmann describes the benefits of her wilderness work for adolescents with attachment issues (Bettmann, Demong & Jaspersen, 2008). Robert Greenway (1995) describes an observed effect of exposure to nature that he calls the “wilderness effect”: a transpersonal change in the relationship between humans and nature that takes place after about three days of exposure to wilderness. This is a change from the mere observation of nature as an abstract sensory experience to an embodied sense of belonging or attachment. I am reminded of Ian McGilchrist’s (2009) book *The Master and his Emissary* and his descriptions of the different activities of the two sides of the brain. The Emissary – the left-brain – sees the world as:

Dependent on denotative language and abstraction ... Decontextualized, explicit, disembodied ... and ultimately lifeless (p. 174).

The Master – the right brain – in contrast yields a world that is:

Changing and evolving, implicit, incarnate, living beings within the context of a living world, but in the nature of things never fully graspable ... and to this world it exists in a relationship of care (p. 174).

Steven Foster and Meredith Little (1998) and Bill Plotkin (2003) work with a type of wilderness effect in their rites of passage and ‘soul-work’ in nature. This process has three stages: severance, threshold and return. Severance is the first stage of

leaving behind the “denotative language” of our familiar life story. Threshold describes the transpersonal change in encountering a new context for an old story. In nature we can experience archetypes in the world and ourselves that are transgressive, or boundaryless; they can move seamlessly back and forth between nature, myth and story and our own personal and internal soul-world. An implicit new context can be then retold or re-linguaged during the process of the return. Plotkin describes two different levels of threshold experience: “Soul encounter”, where we have an experience of touching the numinous in nature, and “Soul initiation”, where we are able to bring back insights of these experiences that change our plans and intentions in our everyday world. Soul initiation might involve three days of walking in nature, a short distance within the brain, but a substantial change in our personal attachment narrative. In Ossian’s story, he is able to have a Soul encounter through his marriage to his fairy bride, but he was unable to safely negotiate his return, his Soul initiation.

Back on the mountain, we stop at the top for a brew. Humidity is probably one hundred percent, a combination of the light rain and sweat. What’s extraordinary about wild landscapes is that every resting place can become home. If we just stop, the world organizes itself around us as the still point of a perfect world, ancient and changing all the time. This place seems to be calling to something deep inside us in a song that we can’t quite hear, although its rhythms are pulsating in our bellies. It feels like a homecoming, a deep sense of attachment to that place even though we have never been here before. As we move on the land levels out and a few hinds check us out, accompanied by the occasional scent of the rutting stags drifting on the breeze. We pass peat bog wallows that still carry an imprint of clear water the size of a deer’s body, surrounded by hoof prints and strands of sphagnum moss churned up by the wallowing stags. We travel up. It’s slow progress and rough going. The streams get smaller until they disappear under the tufted deer grass and can only be followed by the sound of their running water. The high lochans near the watershed are crystal clear and still, appearing and disappearing in the mist and we begin to slip through into the mythic world once again. As the ground levels out, the streams begin to run away ahead of us and we descend into the next valley that begins to open out below.

## **Nature without soul**

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As a young scientist learning all the facts I could about British wildlife, my thinking was, at that time, firmly bounded within a Cartesian and Darwinian narrative.

This was defined and experienced as a paradigm where consciousness and the material world were entirely separate, and biological success was measured purely by the ability to survive, as Richard Dawkins explains in his book *The Blind Watchmaker*:

It is raining DNA outside. On the bank of the Oxford canal at the bottom of my garden is a large willow tree, and it is pumping downy seeds into the air ... That is not a metaphor, it is the plain truth. It couldn't be any plainer if it were raining floppy discs (Dawkins, 1986, p. 111).

Biologists from Charles Darwin to Richard Dawkins have accumulated facts to explain the complexity of nature so we can now understand ecosystems in terms of energy, survival mechanisms and genetics. While Dawkins thinks we can be certain of biological facts, this certainly is less valuable in the subtler ecosystems of intimate emotional relationships. Although philosophy, the arts and even physics have now moved to a postmodern world view and beyond, biology is still trapped, as I was in my early twenties, in a modernist view point, determined by given truths. Challenges to the modernism of contemporary biology are surprisingly uncommon with notable exceptions being the work of Elisabeth Sahtouris (2000), who tries to describe a more systemic or neo-indigenous story of evolution, and John Launer (2001), who points out the paradox of the widening gap between biological and psychological thinking. The language of contemporary biology and ecology has created a world that is scientifically explained but totally dead and all other biological information bows down to the golden calf of Darwinian evolution. It is very difficult to find other narratives to describe our relationship with nature even within the ecopsychological literature. It seems to me that our contemporary relationship with nature is still defined by Darwin and Descartes. In contrast systemic psychotherapies such as attachment narrative therapy (Dallos, 2006) works with multiple truths or stories, and a fundamentalist viewpoint of 'the one truth' could be seen as an unhelpful or even pathological perspective.

One biographical experience that I share with both Rene Descartes and Charles Darwin is early maternal loss; a life event that, if unexamined, can have a powerful organizing impact on our thinking. Descartes mother died when he was two and his father encouraged him into highly intellectual education from an early age. It is worth remembering that Descartes was a man who nailed his wife's dog to a table while it was still alive and cut it open to prove that animals did not have a soul. Today, in the light of psychotherapy and attachment theory, we might understand Descartes' extreme lack of empathy or interest in relationships as a form of attachment disorder. Similarly, Darwin's mother died when he was a small boy and

his father and older sisters told him he should never speak of her again. He did this so completely that as an adult playing a word game with his children he was convinced that there was no such word as ‘Mother’. Is it possible that this loss could have resulted in Darwin’s belief in the primacy of survival? This is a belief characteristic of an avoidant attachment pattern where an experience of terrifying uncertainty makes personal survival a more important focus than the loss of love. In the land of Tír na nÓg, love is more important even than survival.

My current experience of nature more closely represents the ideas of French Islamic philosopher Henry Corbin. Corbin found in Islamic esoteric literature what he describes as a “lost continent” of language (Cheetham, 2003, p. 10) not found in Western language, and philosophy containing descriptions of an “imaginal world” (p. 67). Corbin believed that this imaginal world of patterns and images common to both nature and psyche is the real home of the soul which now lives in exile in the modern world of material causality. His process of exploring this worldview is a type of spiritual practice rooted in language and closely related to depth psychology, and which resembles the ancient form of knowing called Gnosis. Gnosis is “knowledge that changes and transforms the knowing subject” (p. 47) and differs from the objective sharing of information and gathering scientific evidence. Gnosis is a very large slice of reality that currently seems to be missing from the Western worldview pie.

### **Three days deep**

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We are getting used to walking all day and the sensory and psychological detox of being in nature. Amber Burls (2007) calls this experience of wellbeing ‘ecotherapy’, the practice of taking green exercise and the sensory experience of looking at nature. After three days we have moved to a deeper, more liminal place that opens the possibility of ecopsychology or nature based therapy. Ronen Berger (Berger & McLeod, 2006) writes about how the threshold to this place can be facilitated by ritual and ceremony and requires participation from the felt senses of the whole body. We can only cross this threshold like John the Baptist, without the head and its ever vigilant reductive thinking.

The land is beginning to speak to us through our boots and autumn colours seep into our sleep-life. We wake after one of the passing storms and the land is washed clean and bright, a good day for some solo time. We part at the bothy and I cut round the bay and along the shoreline to an area of tidal machair of grass and thrift. This a checkerboard of tussocks and inlets, still wet from the sea, with strings of



bladderwrack and the occasional deer bone. Further inland, away from the salt water, the sphagnum moss takes over filling invisible bogs, fresh and green, but unable to hold the weight of the human footstep. Closer to the river the ground is drier and drained by deep channels you have to jump over. The river is fast, deep and peaty on the outside of the curve, shallowing to a gentle boulder beach with scrawny brambles on the other side. Huge washed-out turf tussocks cut by the river further up lie like beached dolphins in the sun.

As I follow the river up this wide valley alone, nature and my soul begin to banter and flirt in a language of which my rational mind has only a vague knowledge; they are falling in love with each other, embedded in an exchange of mutual Gnosis. I have a deep sense that I am tuning into others who have walked the land for millennia. I could be an indigenous hunter-gatherer, apart for my new *Rab* trousers. Gradually I let go and identify with the banter and let it be a guide to my steps and thoughts, feelings and senses. I begin to recognize that nature and my soul are engaged in playing a great game. This is not the linear game of survival based on winning and losing. No, my soul and nature are both engaged in a complex multidimensional hermeneutic dialogue. They are absorbed in comparing symbols, images and patterns with each other in a process that reminds me of the Glass Bead Game described by Herman Hesse, an author who was strongly influenced by Gnosticism (Hesse, 1943). This for me is the practice of ecopsychology, the delicately facilitated meeting of soul and nature; I am in the land of Tír na nÓg, this is why I come here.

Our educational system seems to have taught us to develop a type of avoidance attachment relationship to these experiences, a defense perhaps against falling in love with the Earth and waking up to extent of our current psychological dissonance. But, as David Abrams describes, we are in fact in relationship with all of nature all the time, and can be in touch with this type of experience if we can become aware of it:

...this breathing landscape is no longer just a passive backdrop against which human history unfolds, but a potentized field of intelligence in which our actions participate (Abrams, 1996, p. 260).

I walk along the otter-less riverbank under a blue, eagle-less sky, but the river is murmuring to me, inviting me to stop. I walk up to the waterfalls where I think I should be stopping, but there is nothing for me there, just some old memories. It's clear I need to return to the place where the river called to me a little way back. Stopping on the bank I sit and write a letter to myself and, as a ritual, wrap the paper tightly around a stone. With a silent prayer I throw the stone into the river and

feel the rapids swallow it up the way a dog eats a piece of chicken, without chewing. I feel a relief – nature and my soul have signalled something to each other. I stay a while and wash my body in the water and dry off in the cold sun. Walking back is easier; something is completed and the sunlight is clear and low. At the shore line, the tide is way out and I walk on the beach, the heart beat of my footsteps on the wet sand stepping over exquisite artworks of seaweed, stones and shells. There are no words for this. Seabirds lazily cruise the incoming tide – they did the real work when it was going out and are just checking they didn't miss anything.

I get back to the bothy and meet up with Al. He has had a good day writing and walked on the shore. We have supper outside the bothy followed by a sundowner of a cup of tea and the last of the tobacco in a skinny roll-up.

## **The return**

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The next day we wind up out of the valley on an ancient path. Groups of stags bellow on the hill and there is the occasional clack of antlers as we hit the sea breeze at the coll. We pause before the descent, emotions rising and falling with the landscape, and thoughts turn towards the return, work, the car and the journey home. Further down the valley, closer to the sheltered coast, the vegetation becomes lush: pines, then oak woodland with rhododendrons and ferns. We find a place to stay and have a shower and then head to the village for food. I sleep fitfully inside a building for the first time in five days; Ossian's story reminds us that the return needs to be managed carefully. In the morning we catch the boat with some of the stalkers and a Frenchman, along with the heads of the stags he had shot on the mountain. This enterprise is feeding both the local economy and the Frenchman's fading machismo. After a short train ride and we are back at the car and heading south. At the head of Glencoe, the road is closed and we are diverted to the coast road – a substantial detour. It is as we are driving along the coastal road that something catches my eye and simultaneously touches me inside: road-kill or something else, but it seems important. I ask Al to turn the car around and we park up and walk back to take a look.

Two road-kill otters lie side-by-side decaying on the verge. The maggots have been and gone, a lone straggler wandering over one of the bodies unaware he has missed the great feast by weeks. Their fur has fallen out and their skins are black and smooth like bin liners, broken teeth and bone spilling out of their mouths from their crushed skulls. We stand over them wondering how long they might have been here and how they came to be run over, thinking we are back in the day world. Then it

dawns on me: I remember my intent; nature, the great trickster, as a parting gesture has made another play in the glass bead game with my soul. Even the otters seem to be in on this one; relationship is more important than mere survival in the land of Tír na nÓg.

I thought I might find otter spraint, a sighting, a bone or even another otter skin. But nature shows up with two dead otters together in one place: a strong soulful image, but nothing for my adolescent biologist collector's ego. I am left challenged, thankful and at a loss. We give them our thanks; we take nothing, and leave them as they are. It could take a long time to figure out this message and what powerful initiatory invitation is being asked of me within the story of my life. Game on.

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