

Crucible:

A Journey of Reconciliation with Self and Nature

by Wendy Sarkissian

This book is for the Earth
and honours
the life-affirming work
of
John Seed OAM

Paired with John Seed in the “Learning to See Each Other” exercise in Joanna Macy’s 1984 Australian “Despair and Personal Empowerment” workshop, I could hardly hold his gaze. Those deep eyes, that pain. I fell into the despair and pain of years of intense activism for environmental causes. John stared at me, clear and calm. I fell into his eyes, sensing some of what he knew, his experiences saving the rainforests, his commitment.
Joanna then directed us:

Open your awareness to the gifts and strengths and the potentialities in this being
Behind those eyes are unmeasured reserves of courage and intelligence . . .
In this person are gifts for the healing of our world. In him are powers that can redound to the joy of all beings.

I promised to join John’s work in my own way, although I did not know how. Now I begin to imagine what I might do.

Prologue

[At midlife] There is an internal impetus to become a whole person and when we spend time in the metaphorical forest and the actual forest or natural world, we are exposed to the possibility of retrieval and growth of our instinctive nature, our spiritual connection with Nature, and our sense of oneness with the universe.

Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Crossing to Avalon*, 1994: 157

This is the story of a personal journey of discovery. I invite you to bear witness to my experiences, my initiatory journey. It’s not about ten years meditating in a cave or scaling the highest peak. It’s about something simple: leaving the city and living in solitude in the bush, not even in a remote location. Just in an unfamiliar place in self-imposed exile at age 48. I have struggled to find a way to tell this story because it’s primarily a journal of my time alone. I didn’t achieve solitude very easily or comfortably. Most of my insights occurred after I returned to urban life. I had insights while I was ‘away’ but the intensity of the experience kept me from making much sense of them.

My story is about a journey of the self towards the Self, or the *ecological self*. It was a deep personal journey. How to tell this story? Is it worth telling? Is the story of a middle-aged woman’s year spent in self-reflection and confusion in the Australian bush a valid topic for a book? I believe it is. That period transformed all my understandings and relationships. I can’t say that it healed all of them but it pointed the way. My own intransigence kept the rest from happening. I set out to see if I could separate myself from my busy, hectic, distracted, urban professional life, to be quiet and explore how I might attend to my ecological literacy. I felt that if I kept on working my 80-hour weeks, travelling all the time, I would either get very sick, have a serious accident, lose my sense of direction altogether or I didn’t know what ... I was truly worn out, exhausted and fearful.

On the other hand, I had been working for some years with a provocative Buddhist therapist/teacher who encouraged me both to “stay in my body” (stay grounded) and to live in a state of “not knowing”, to value uncertainty and to give up my passion for how things were “s’posed to be.” His teachings

emphasised the value of “beginner’s mind”. Thus, at some level, I was preparing for change. I didn’t realise I was about to undertake a journey of initiation, an archetypal journey, and I probably would have balked if someone told me that then. But looking back, I can see that the experience had recognisable, predictable stages—and transitions. Some of the passages are clear; others are not. Thus, I hope to offer both my confusion and my insights. Reading books about ecopsychology and initiatory journeys helped me understand some of what occurred. I use them to illuminate some of my insights.

For thirty years I was a town planner, familiar with its language, its idioms. Like most of my colleagues I was unfamiliar with the concept of “the journey”, though it is well known in sacred and therapeutic literature. I undertook this journey to save my soul.

Before I left the city and for many months after I arrived in the bush, I questioned if I had the fortitude, strength and flexibility to handle what I was about to experience. I had no idea what to expect. I knew that I was strong, but I did not understand flexibility. My specialty was endurance. Living in the bush and dealing with the daily ‘emergencies’ often initiated by my alcoholic neighbour and former lover (and our interlocking excitement addictions), I began to see myself as resourceful. My bush neighbours took bets as to how long I would last there (three weeks? six weeks? three months?). In the end, they admitted that I had what it took. I was astonished and delighted that I could handle almost all aspects of the rough life in the bush.

Although from the outside my life looks much the same as it did before I went to the bush (traveling, meetings, writing, working in my small consulting firm...), it’s dramatically changed. All my work is to one purpose: the healing of our estrangement from the natural world. I have no ‘big’ unanswered questions about my general purpose, my goal, my direction. There are many paths and each day I need to make decisions about which one to follow, but the general direction is now determined.

While for reasons of confidentiality I have had to fictionalise some characters and places, the events are essentially true. Three voices are woven throughout the fabric of the book. The first is the voice of my ‘inner’ self, communicating to my other selves via my journal and letters to a dear friend, an academic who listens to my deeper voices. The second is my rational, analytic, ‘academic’ self, communicating in rather formal letters (“progress reports”) to my first Ph.D. dissertation supervisor, Dr. Turner. Third is the voice of Nature, communicated via animals, birds and plants and the wider landscapes, skies and watercourses of Deep Creek. I have used material from my journal and letters written over thirteen months (with some written after my return to urban life). The themes deal with changing perceptions and changing heart, leading to the loss of a sense of separation and alienation and the first full experience of a sense of oneness with Nature. My approach could be called ecological spirituality, spiritual ecology or experiential ecology. It contributes to the emerging field of eco-psychology, being advanced by Theodore Roszak and others. A focus of this work is to “bring the spirit out of the closet” with respect to environmental issues and to explore the ‘green’ dimensions of relationships between soul and psyche and outer soul and outer psyche. Some qualities of my experience may parallel experiences of indigenous or primal peoples living in close relation to the Earth.

This experience has shown me that all journeys to wholeness involve, to some degree, the absurd and the bizarre, darkness, taboos, the need to confront “old stuff” and unhealed and unintegrated aspects of the psyche and the personality. They are effective when they can include solitude, aspects of unfamiliarity and unfamiliar territory. Change is difficult in a familiar place.

True healing journeys yield embodied responses. These are most easily achieved through embodied and embodying experiences. The added ingredient of an intimate human relationship deepens the experience but it can also distract and detract from more important issues and processes. The deepening effect of wild Nature strengthens the process of transformation and self-healing processes undertaken with the explicit involvement of or dependence on the agency of wild Nature yield healing benefits for the Earth and for nonhuman Nature. While these transformative processes cannot be planned, I realise that their sequence can be predicted—and replicated.

Back in late 1991, when I had burned my bridges, closed my consulting business, enrolled as a full-time student and bought my air ticket, I discovered that my friend and interpreter-to-be, on whose land I was to build a house and live for at least a year, was an alcoholic. Despite my circumstances, an adult child of an alcoholic father—with many unresolved codependency issues—I decided to undertake my journey anyway. The psychiatrist I consulted and I both agreed that that this was either the wisest or most foolish thing I would ever do. At that time, I did not understand how the combination of my own

inexperience with bush living, the unbearably rough, hot and humid conditions, the extreme social and physical isolation, an alien culture and the all-pervasive aspects of my friend's alcoholism would affect me. It turned out that I was up to it but just! I had the personal resources and ego strength to manage the time in the bush and to find great healing within the experience. But there were times when I thought I would not make it.

This experience has had far-reaching effects. My own healing at the hands of a compassionate Nature has allowed me to reconnect with my only sibling, my sister, from whom I have been estranged for most of our lives. In finding a way to be compassionate towards our father and myself, I have found compassion for her childhood as a rejected child.

The most difficult part of the journey was learning to speak out about my feelings to my alcoholic friend and to use accurate and concrete language. In my family of origin we were not allowed to scream, slam doors or walk out. When I started to speak openly (initially screaming—late into the night) about his betrayals, I shook all over. Saying the word 'alcoholic' elicited a physical reaction. I thought I would die of fear. In Vancouver, some fifteen months after I had left the bush, I found myself for the first time screaming at my mother, swearing, walking out and slamming the door. (These angry responses later resolved into more effective ways of dealing with her.)

This experience changed me in ways which initially I could barely describe. I feel somewhere near my navel a tugging toward the place in the Australian bush which sheltered and provoked me. It was a turning point in terms of my family life and intimate relations. I have found a life partner, whom I married in 1994. I have found qualities of love and patience and compassion I never believed possible. It's as though by finding compassion for my alcoholic friend and forgiving both of us (even though he steadfastly refuses to forgive me), I have been able to open myself to deeper human loving. The key to this opening, this creativity and this renewed openness to human loving has been the healing power of Nature.

My journey is very much the journey a woman would make at mid-life. For several months after I returned to city life, I could not engage my analytic side. I could write stories but I could not read or think straight or find my car keys. I could hardly drive. The Change coincided with another Change in my perceptions, my consciousness. It was a fertile time, this transition: a time of testing, healing and being provoked down to the cellular level. I began to see—in hindsight—that the bush took compassion on me as I began to grow in compassion for all beings—and for myself.

Now I long for nothing I do not have. I feel capable of finding my purpose when I seem to lose it. I no longer feel different from or less than others. Every step has meaning; life is sparkling with learning, eager to yield its lessons.

Best of all, I feel that I am a part of life, of the natural world. The shell of my "skin-encapsulated ego" with all its limitations has been shattered and life has broken through. For a while after my return, living without my mask, my *persona*, I was fragile and vulnerable. Now, softer and more approachable, I anticipate the flexibility necessary for the next stages of my evolution. And I know I do not have to do this important work— this healing work—alone.