

PRINCIPLES OF ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE MEDICINE

Healing and Ecological Literacy

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Many of us are highly literate when it comes to understanding the political and cultural environments in which we live. We are actively becoming more literate about our personal health—primarily through understanding the value of diet, sleep, exercise and meditation. Yet most of us are lagging far behind in developing a literate understanding of our connection to the environment. David Orr, in his book *Ecological Literacy*, writes, “By failing to include ecological perspectives in any number of subjects, students are taught that ecology is unimportant for history, politics, economics, society, and so forth. And through television they learn that the earth is theirs for the taking (p. 85).”¹ We are also taught that ecology does not contribute to health. In this article, I offer six principles of ecological healing that build a bridge with the values of ecological literacy, creating a powerful connection between understanding the environment and living healthier, fuller lives.

For Orr, ecological literacy grows our depth and presence in relationship to the natural world while simultaneously enabling us to develop greater levels of knowledge and sensitivity. Ecological literacy, he writes, is “driven by a sense of wonder, the sheer delight in being alive in a beautiful, mysterious, bountiful world (p. 86).” At its heart, this perspective invites us to reflect upon the value of our personal choices in the context of the awesome power of nature. Becoming literate about the environment also enables

us to develop greater discernment based on our relationship to larger patterns and processes in the natural world. As Orr writes, if “we don’t include the ground on which we stand, we miss an important element of good thinking—the capacity to distinguish between health and disease in natural systems and their relation to health and disease in human ones (p. 86).” In other words, a richer, more compelling understanding of the intricacies of our natural environment goes hand-in-hand with a deeper knowledge of personal health and disease. Experience of the lifeworld provides insight into living healthier lives with richer integrity.

One of the most important contributions of ecological literacy for health is its ability to help us “see things whole (p.88).” This means “to see both the wounds we have inflicted on the natural world in the name of mastery and those we have inflicted on ourselves and on our children for no good reason, whatever our stated intentions (p. 88).” The phrase “in the name of mastery” refers to our exploitation of the environment. We have done real harm to our environment *and to ourselves* as a result of our erroneous belief that we can master the natural world.

This particular myth dominates much of the thinking in our medical and healthcare system. “We can master disease” is the hallmark of most current research in medicine including mapping the genetic code,

Guidelines for Ecological Healing

All healing is
ecological healing

- Healing is complex and cannot be understood through a single discipline or technique

- The way healing occurs is as important as its theory

- Experience in the natural world is an essential part of understanding healing and conducive to good health

- Healing occurs in part as a dialogue with place and has the characteristics of good conversation

- Ecological healing enhances our competence with natural systems



Our Mission

The Teleosis Foundation is devoted to the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine (ESM).

The Foundation has three major goals:

To educate

health professionals, environmentalists and the general public about the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine.



To provide a community

network for those who are teaching, researching or practicing ESM.



To provide access

to high quality, cost-effective Ecologically Sustainable Medicine through low-cost integrative health clinics for underserved communities.

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genetically modifying organisms, and creating artificial organs and designer drugs that enhance personal functioning such as Viagra, Prozac, and Lipitor. But this begs the question—are we really getting healthier? What are the hidden costs of this “mastery”? What unintended wounds are we inflicting on ourselves and our children? The recent retraction of hormone replacement therapy due to negative long-term consequences is a good example of how our attempts at “mastery” are easily foiled by nature.

As we begin to live in the deeper meaning of ecological literacy, we come to see that this is a radical way of being in the world. Orr writes that ecological literacy “forces us to reckon with the roots of our ailments, not just with their symptoms (p. 88).” Genuine health represents a balance both internally and externally—between each one of us and the total environment in which we live. Other life forms share in the balance that creates our personal health; without them our own health is significantly compromised. The roots of our illness can be found in both ecological and personal imbalances. Ecologically literate choices offer us the power to achieve greater levels of health, far beyond our individual self. This perspective radicalizes healing. Our choices in healing can lead to greater self-realization, as well as more dynamic healing for our planet.

Given this reality, how can we live as healthy citizens of the larger whole? The six guidelines that follow advocate a paradigm of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine (ESM) informed by the perspective of ecological literacy.

All healing is ecological healing

Healing means to “make whole.” Our personal health is interconnected to all the other beings on this planet. When we approach the process of healing with integrity for the whole, we create a healthier and more just society. Our concern for the envi-

ronment begins with what we put in our bodies—not just our food, the air we breathe, and the water we drink—but the medicines we use as well. All healing is ecological healing.

Our healthcare system often operates in opposition to this understanding. The primary assumption is that what goes on inside the human body is distinctly separate from our environment. Imaging systems scan inside our bodies, pharmacological technologies manipulate our physiology, and genetically modified creatures inhabit our bodies through artificial immunity.

Only recently have we begun to observe the consequences of such manipulations. As was discussed in the last issue of *Symbiosis*, Vol. 1 No. 1, the misuse of antibiotics has changed the bacterial context of our planet more significantly in the last 50 years than in the previous 2 billion years. Killer bacterial infections go untreated daily. We have little understanding of the long-term consequences irradiated food, genetically modified products, and artificial medicines will have on our environment. Many drugs we ingest end up in our food chain, threatening the balance that allows for a healthy environment for all of life.² Recent studies suggest that puberty is occurring earlier both in humans and wild animals, and is a by-product of pharmacological medicines ending up in the environment.

The root cause of many of the negative consequences of our healthcare system can be traced to an inherent lack of ecological integrity. We have been acting as if choices for our individual health can be made without taking into consideration consequences our intervention might have on the health of the environment. This cannot continue. To include the ecological perspective in matters of personal healthcare fundamentally forces all healing to become ecological healing.



Healing is complex and cannot be understood through a single discipline or technique

Contemporary medicine generally approaches disease and health as a simple cause and effect relationship. For example, ulcers are caused by bacteria, gout is caused by an overgrowth of tissue, and obesity is caused by an excess consumption of fat combined with inadequate exercise. This causal perspective both simplifies disease and homogenizes the treatments we provide. It ignores a richer, systems-based perspective that takes into account a variety of multi-factorial imbalances including physical, emotional, mental, social and environmental issues.

Modern epidemiological studies continue to uncover many roots of illness not only in biology but in social injustice, environmental toxicity, community degradation, and chronic impoverishment. In truth, illness and healing are complex. Solutions to these complex problems will require complex solutions, which is better served by an integrative approach.

For example, recent studies reveal in many ulcer cases a prevalence of *H. pylori*, an intestinal bacteria. Therefore, antibiotics have become the standard choice in treating most ulcers. However, this approach ignores such important issues as food choice and lifestyle. To many, healthy food choices are and continue to be very beneficial in the treatment of ulcers. This approach becomes problematic in communities where access to healthy foods is limited. In these contexts, it becomes easier to prescribe an antibiotic and the vicious cycle continues.

Cultural habits also form a barrier to making healthy food choices. Consumer messages, known as branding, literally barrage our daily life, reinforcing poor food choices such as McDonalds or Starbucks. Lifestyle compounds the issue, often leading to reliance on fast food or easily prepared products that do not offer adequate nutritional quality. Teaching people how to eat or

providing vitamins is not an adequate solution to the problem. Real healing requires a careful examination of the spectrum of issues affecting the patient's health and a good treatment plan will take all of this into account.

Ecologically Sustainable Medicine advocates an integrative approach that offers a balance between Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) practices with the best of contemporary orthodox medicine. ESM offers flexible treatment protocols, allowing individuals to receive customized programs. Orthodox and complementary medical practices work together much more efficiently in an ESM practice—both have an effect on elements within the larger system. In ESM, CAM practices are the first treatment of choice because they are cost-effective, non-toxic and renewable. More invasive and expensive orthodox treatments are reserved for the cases where they are necessary and other routes have been exhausted.

The way healing occurs is as important as its theory

We now know that the relationship between the doctor and the patient is central to the healing process. Researchers have proven that the atmosphere of healing, including the way the doctor interacts with the patient, has a significant positive effect on the outcome of medical treatments. This research shows that “different patterns of communication have effects on the clinical outcomes of patient care. The kinds of medical care that patients find satisfying tends to alleviate psychosomatic symptoms and make patients more compliant with their treatment regimes, and thereby produce better clinical outcomes.” (Egbert, et al., 1964; Greenfield, Kaplan and Ware, 1985; Greenfield, Kaplan, Ware, Yano and Frank, 1988; Kaplan, Greenfield and Ware, 1989). <http://www.changesurfer.com/Hlth/DPReview.html>

The Principles of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine (ESM)

Ecologically sustainable medical practices are:

- Safe and harmless
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- Clean and non-toxic
-
- Cost-effective
-
- Non-polluting
-
- Adaptable and flexible
-
- Renewable
-
- Protective of the quality of life on earth, the environment and earth's natural resources
-
- Synergistic with human health and planetary well-being
-
- Connected with the web of life



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The first research into doctor/patient relationships was conducted in 1951, yet we have seen very little emphasis in mainstream medicine on this important aspect of healing. Much of contemporary medicine actually interferes with this primary relationship. Contributing factors include overspecialization, the decline of the primary care physician, the rise of organizational structures (hospitals, insurance companies, drug companies) that mediate the primary doctor/patient relationship, declining autonomy for the patient within the medical system, and the financial restrictions on dispersing medical care.

ESM practices counteract this trend by bringing the relationship between the healer and the patient to the forefront of the process. CAM practices such as homeopathy, osteopathy, and various body therapies require an engaged doctor/patient relationship to achieve their intended outcomes. Personal healing in the context of CAM requires the healer and the patient to enter into a shared dialogue. Relationships based on good dialogue have a way of potentiating long-term health goals, resulting in more lasting and sustainable healing. In this context, healing becomes a service, not a commodity. In an ecologically literate healthcare system, the way healing occurs will always include the humane delivery of health services with an emphasis on communication and interconnection.

Experience in the natural world is an essential part of understanding healing and is conducive to good health

Research into the value of the natural world in the healing process offers a strong case for incorporating nature into our own health journeys. K. Irvine and S. Warber, in *Alternative and Complementary Therapy*, wrote an article entitled “Greening Healthcare: Practicing as if the natural environment really mattered.” (20012 V 8 No 5 p. 76-83). The authors provide ample evidence

demonstrating the power of nature to promote personal healing. In one example, they cited research that proved that patients use less medication and have shorter stays in hospitals if they have windows with views of nature.

Other studies demonstrate positive effects from exposure to nature including less stress on the nervous system, less acute pain and greater satisfaction with many aspects of life, including where one lives and with one’s job. Interaction with nature also encourages positive social interactions, lessens aggressive behavior, and promotes feelings of greater interdependence and connection with all beings. The survey concludes that “interaction with the natural world positively affects multiple dimensions related to human health: physical, psychological-emotional, social and spiritual (p.80).”

A little more than 25 years ago Paul Sheppard, in his seminal work *Nature and Madness*, postulated that our modern disconnection with nature has negative consequences on our health. We now know that the chronic detrimental effects of contemporary culture, including overexposure to media and rampant consumerism, can be alleviated with regular immersion in the natural world.

Ecopsychologists and wilderness therapists alike attest to the healing power generated by spending time in a natural setting. Exercising outdoors has a far more beneficial effect on our health than working out on a treadmill. The outdoors provides sunlight, fresh air, and stimuli to the senses, offering a fuller workout for the mind and body. This stands in opposition to the old paradigm that advocated 20-30 minutes of cardiovascular workout on a machine, with a primary focus on the biomechanics of the exercise experience.

As we become increasingly alienated from the natural world, immersion in nature will continue to play a significant role in

both our physical and emotional health. As our cultural choices continue to have a detrimental effect on the environment, personal healing may well become one of the primary incentives not to further compromise our planet.

Healing occurs in part as a dialogue with place and has the characteristics of good conversation

How many of us have had a good experience in a hospital? Hospitals seldom offer an experience in which the place facilitates the healing. Yet we continue to imagine hospital care as our salvation; it is where we turn when we are ill. Unfortunately, modern hospitals are designed for distribution of technological services as well as for financial gain. The result is that our society invests huge amounts of resources in hospital-based care. This care is rightfully cited as the cause of skyrocketing costs of medical care and services.

Our hospitals, with their expensive technological solutions, are all too often places of illness rather than healing. Recent research reveals alarming facts:

“Medical errors have been estimated to kill 48,000-98,000 Americans each year, and to injure an additional 1 million . . . Furthermore, when trained observers who visited a general surgery unit were asked to evaluate the rate of adverse events, they reported that almost 50% of patients experienced an adverse event, which was serious in 18% of cases.”

— *Epidemiology of medical error.* Weingart, SN. et al. *BMJ* 2000; 320:774-777.

“Most people don’t expect to go into a hospital and come out even sicker because of an infection they got as a patient, but 1 in 20 do. And each

year, about 90,000 people die from hospital-acquired infections. This leading cause of death in the U.S. costs our health care system \$5 billion annually.”

— <https://secure2.convio.net/cu/site/Advocacy?id=121&page=UserAction>

Medicine that is closely connected to the natural world requires a deeper connection to the places we live and work. Central to a functioning vision of ESM is a supportive network of community clinics that provide healthcare where people live. This vision is not only more sustainable, it promotes direct participation in our cultural and natural communities. Healing clinics of this type would provide an antidote to our fragmented, technology-based culture, offering a healing place for the whole person and a healing center for our communities.

In a fully realized vision of a network of ESM clinics, people will have a place to go in their own community that provides more than just medical care. These community clinics will offer classes in wellness practices, self care and healthy living; they will be gateways for community supported agriculture (CSA); and they will offer community-based fitness centers. Sustainable clinics will provide a safe haven from the stress of modern living, will be easy to access and will support personal wellness goals. These clinics will be integrated with nature and founded on sound ecological practices that maintain the connection to place, resulting in a positive, vital interaction with where we live. Contrary to our current model, the medical center in the context of ESM offers a powerful sense of place-based healing and connection to the natural world.



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An Exercise in Ecological Literacy

One way to experience ecological literacy in your own life is to engage in the following exercise: What do I eat?

For one week explore the origins of what you consume.

WEEK ONE:

- Make a list for an entire week of everything you eat.
- As you make the list, find out what all the ingredients are in the food (if it's processed) and where they come from (the ground, the lab, New Zealand, etc.).
- Evaluate what percentage of your food is processed, meaning it has been prepared by someone else, versus how much of it is fresh.
- Find out how many non-natural chemicals are involved in the farming and production of your food.
- Evaluate what percentage of the food you eat is produced organically or pesticide free.
- Take a trip to the farmers market and ask the local farmers about how many chemicals are required to prepare food.
- Compare the ecological consequences of eating organic food versus processed food. Consider how much it costs the earth for you to eat the amount of processed food you consume in a week.
- Compare the nutritional value of the quantity of processed food you eat versus the amount of freshly prepared organic food.

WEEK TWO:

- For one week change your diet to organic food and buy from local farmers.
- Notice any changes in how you feel. Consider any effects on your health.

Most of us think about these things sporadically. Bringing our attention directly to the ecological and health consequences of what we eat strengthens the relationship between ecologically sustainable practices and health.

Ecological healing enhances our competence with natural systems

The reciprocity between competence in the natural world and sustainable healthcare cannot be underestimated. When healing is stimulated naturally, using ESM practices, nature is brought directly into people's lives. Many ESM practices use elements of nature, such as plants or flowers (see Flower Essence Therapy article in this issue) in the healing process. Healing that uses these techniques offers transformative experiences of the power of nature, facilitating a sense of wonder or 'biophilia'. ESM practices often help people experience shifts of awareness into more holistic ways of understanding the world.

The infusion of ecological thinking into matters of personal health care can serve to enhance our understanding of natural systems because they reinforce our intimate relationship with nature. We begin to live the truth that what happens to the world around us affects our health, just as our healing affects the world in which we live.

Personal healing, when undertaken with integrity and ecological awareness, facilitates individual, societal and environmental recovery. The promise of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine offers hope for a whole and unified experience of life. The pressing need for sustainable solutions to human affairs continues to grow. Sustainable, life affirming personal healing will contribute to a positive future. Ecological healing using Ecologically Sustainable Medicine offers each of us an opportunity to improve ourselves, our relationships, our communities and our physical environment.

REFERENCES:

- 1 Orr, D. 1992 *Ecological Literacy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- 2 Buhner, S. H 2003 *The Lost Language of Plants*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Publishing.