Deep Ecology and Disruptive Environmental Education

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At its best, environmental education involves an unlearning process that disrupts the routine habits we have learned to live by that continue to harm ecologies. With this disruptive unlearning, as David Chang articulates, students may not be equipped to psychologically cope with some of the more disturbing realities of just how destructive or indifferent humans can be in our relations with the natural world. Chang suggests that environmental educators, in highlighting the human impact on the environment, proceed with a conscientious anticipation of the possible range of emotional responses from students engaged in sustained processes of questioning and critique. Environmental educators are charged with the pedagogical challenge of walking the fine line of providing an educational experience aimed at disrupting students' comfortable assumptions while at the same time ensuring that disruption does not morph into moral distress. Any experience that disrupts students' deep-seated, pre-existing beliefs may induce feelings that become overwhelming and result in moral distress. Then, it is likely that the very aims of environmental education can be undermined, quashing students' ability to be agents of social change. If a purpose of environmental education is to enhance ecological consciousness in students and change the way they relate to the world, then it becomes critical that they are not overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness. As such, Chang maintains that, unless a more holistic approach in a dialogic community is enacted by environmental educators, then a pedagogy that disrupts may have a counterproductive effect to their efforts.

I would like to discuss how a disruptive experience can bring

about a state of helplessness by further exploring the example of the vegan student that Chang introduces. While learning of the grotesque and shocking details of the dismembering and killing of "food animals"—what Upton Sinclair called in *The Jungle*, "the hog-squeal of the universe"[1]—can be traumatic, the distress stems from more than the details of the butchering. Perhaps this student was disheartened upon learning that the global meat industry is the largest contributor to global warming, releasing more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than the transportation industry.[2] Or, perhaps this student was disgusted to learn that industrial animal agriculture perpetuates global starvation and food insecurity and contributes to massive land, air, and water pollution, deforestation, and soil erosion.[3] The student looks around and notices more and more consumers buying "local" and "organic," yet global meat consumption is on the rise. It is no surprise that emotional chords are struck and the student feels shattered and powerless.

A transformative learning experience that results in a student not eating animals for ethical and environmental reasons is change that can be empowering, yet it comes at a cost. When the educational process begins to distance us from our loved ones, our traditions, and our culture, then the effects of a transformation that was formerly thought of as categorically beneficial comes into question. Chang's analysis of transformative education challenges the view that learning experiences that result in change are always for the better. There are unintended effects in reconciling new knowledge and awareness with one's social identity, such as the relational cost of estrangement, as Chang points out. For example, raised in social and cultural environments where meat eating is omnipresent and mostly unquestioned, vegans do not correspond to the social majority, the conventional norms of mainstream consumer society, or the food and eating traditions of most families and cultures. Chang writes that "for many students, the immediate effect of critique

starts with their closest relations, the primary bonds of socialization through which cultural norms are maintained."[4] Now informed and dependent on a number of ethical, ecological, and health factors, the student now perceives not only her diet but also her social relations and culture differently, perhaps now with a sense of detachment. Before what was sharing grandma's delicious bacon at the ceremonial family breakfast is now gorging on cuts of pig stomach, an act of violence. The façade and symbol of "meat" has been disrupted and now replaced with acute awareness about what meat actually *is*—dead animal flesh—and with a new way of perceiving, not just her upbringing and culture, but the world.

Chang recognizes that challenging an existing worldview is part and parcel of a disruptive education, and he suggests educators incorporate a range of humanistic, artistic, and reflective holistic practices to counter the "rending effects of disruption." While Chang is using the term *holistic* in the context of pedagogy—teachers attending "to the inner dimensions of students' learning experiences"—perhaps it would be useful to think of the term *holism* in a wider ecological and ontological sense. Deep ecologists write about questioning our anthropocentric worldview through an expansion of the understanding of ecology as primarily a science while incorporating religious and philosophical values and questions that search for an ecological consciousness. As such, a holism that is not only pedagogical but that is broader in its ontological emphasis might help teacher and student realize how an eco-centric value system engenders deeper questions about our relationships with the world. Adhering to ontological interconnectedness, deep ecology not only challenges our view *of* the world but stresses the various lifeforms, flora, and fauna that we relate *with in* the world.

The shift to a more ecological consciousness alters what we think constitutes a relation, imagining *relation* as interconnections between

and with beings and lifeforms other-than-human. A holism that takes account not only of the subjectivities of learners but also the external realities of ecology reminds the distressed student to realize all that she can now relate to and identify *with*. "The ontological boundaries of the self extend outward," writes David Keller, "incorporating more and more of the lifeworld into the self."[5] As we ask deeper and deeper questions, we find that who we identify with is widened and continually reaching beyond ourselves and our species. Gandhi, in advocating deep ecologist principles (without calling them that), put it this way: "I believe in advaita (non-duality), I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives."[6] Gandhi's belief in an "essential unity" of lifeforms disrupts our socialized notions of identity that set us apart and above all that is nonhuman. Deep ecologists make a distinction between the "social self," which is conceptualized in anthropocentric terms of identity (i.e., race, gender, religion, class, etc.,), and an "ecological self," which, without ignoring the social self, takes account of the natured qualities of our being that connect us with the land, air, water, and nonhuman species. An ecological self prioritizes our interdependence and coexistence with the biosphere and recognizes a more egalitarian sense of identification, a sense of belonging to "all that lives," as Gandhi wrote. If environmental education projects are to value the ecological self, the human subject ought to be de-centered in the pedagogical process of disruption and instead be understood as one part of the ecology of being.

As in the case of the vegan student, feelings of isolation and estrangement are the conceivable effects of a consciousness in transition from an anthropocentric view of the world and self to an eco-centric view of the world and self. In his essay about critiquing anthropocentrism, John Seed writes: "When humans investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric self-cherishing, a most profound change in consciousness begins to take place. Alienation subsides … there is a

transformation in your relationship to other species, and in your commitment to them."[7] Hence, the vegan student finds comfort in knowing that her subjective state of moral distress matters much less to the nonhuman world than her commitment to not eat animals. While she will most likely never witness the demise of factory farming, there is ample reason to not despair: the action of not eating meat makes a real difference in the lifeworld—a 200-animals-*not*-killed-per-year difference and a 1,600 pounds-of-C0²-*not*-released-into-the-atmoshper-a-year difference. The point is that students are much more than their individual egos, and that ecological holism may help students internalize and realize an identification with the earthly changes and the diverse lifeforms that extend well beyond students' subjectivities. To end with Seed: "the realization that rocks will dance, and that roots go deeper than 4,000 million years, may give us the courage to face despair and break through to a more viable consciousness, one that is sustainable and in harmony with life again."[8]

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1 Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Signet Classic, 1960), 39-40.

2 Henning Steinfeld, et al., *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options* (Rome: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2006).

3 Andrew Kimbrell, ed., *The Fatal Harvest Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture* (Washington: Island Press, 2002).

4 David Chang, "Holding the Pieces: Pedagogy Beyond Disruptive Environmental Education," this volume.

5 David Keller, "Deep Ecology," in *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman (Detroit: Macmillan, 2009), 207.

6 As cited in Arne Naess, "Self-realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in *The Deep Ecology Movement*, eds. Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995), 23.

7 John Seed, "Anthropocentrism," in *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*,

eds. Bill Devall and George Sessions (Layton, UT: Gibbs M. Smith, 1985), 243.

8 Ibid., 244-245.