

Rewilding systemic practice

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Volume 4

Issue 1

Winter 2021

Keywords:

*ecotherapy,
EcoSystemic Return,
rewilding,
systemic practice,
co-explorers*

Citation Link

Abstract

This paper is written in the context of the current ecological crisis affecting physical and mental health, social, economic, and political contexts, at local and global levels which calls for the disruption of old ways of thinking, living and moving towards the future through collective action. One way of responding as a systemic and family psychotherapist, has been my experience of rewilding my systemic practice with individuals, couples, and families in the UK since taking therapy outdoors. I will offer some examples of ecotherapy as part of my own personal and professional journey in “coming home” through nature, becoming an exterior designer of outdoor therapeutic space and a minimalist wild therapist. I invite us all to re-think and re-create a therapeutic space which, by its very essence, is wild, meaning boundaryless, infinitely spacious and unpredictable. It can open up opportunities for creativity, for using metaphors to explore meanings beyond words. Nature becomes not only the context in which I practice but my co-therapist or even the primary therapist. Together we can enrich the therapeutic process through *moments of magic* and facilitate change using a *wild reflecting team*. In my experience of ecotherapy, voices from the wild carry unique messages, for example, birdsong can provide unexpected voices, useful interruptions or disruptions that can enrich the therapeutic process. Such a *wild reflecting team* can also be a daring metaphor to welcome the unexpected and unfamiliar into our systemic practices and relationships, to include new emerging and marginalised perspectives which may bring us all more in touch with our wildness, lost indigenous ways of relating and shape our futures through collective action.

Rewilding my systemic practice: “Moments of magic” from my ecotherapy practice

In the last two years I have been through a process of rewilding my systemic practice with individuals, couples and families. This has created a context for many significant therapeutic moments, “moments of magic” as described by one of the parents I work with. Given the context of a rewilding of therapy in and through nature, I will use the term “co-explorers” to describe the people I work with.

A wild therapy room in the woods: exterior designing and home making in nature

In developing my ecotherapy practice I have been thinking about how my personal experiences of home making across the Italian and English cultures, my passion for interior design, have influenced my relationship with the natural, the imaginal space made up by the landscape, the natural elements, and therapeutic boundaries outdoors. I am inspired by the Fifth province approach, which advocates for an imaginal and sacred space, a dialogical space to create the possibility of new understandings, new meanings out of different pathways, identities and experiences and, most importantly, a space where there is no need for othering. It invites entry to a space where many diverse and even conflicting positions and practices can co-exist beyond time and space and be negotiated in dialogue with others (McCarthy, 2001).



If I am in nature, I often experience the urge to find a protected space, a corner, a den in which to sit undisturbed, maybe hide, a legacy from my childhood. As a therapist, thinking how I create a safe therapeutic space, I am holding the idea of space as sacred and intimate, as private rather than public. However, in an open outdoor space how would I convey safety, intimacy, and boundaries?

In the past two years I have been practicing in the local green spaces, within the Natural Cemetery, Memorial and burial grounds for all faiths. It has become like a new home in nature for me i.e. a place where I feel safe and comfortable. I re-discovered my innate wish to be an interior designer and have been drawn to experimenting as an exterior designer by creating my first wild therapy room. I chose a spot in the woods, slightly off the path, drawing some boundaries by placing some branches around it and a focal point made by some rocks and sticks. It felt exciting. It was a liminal space, between the

more protected woodland and the open pastures, which was, however, exposed to the worst weather conditions and high winds. Therefore, when I returned after the winter months, I found it was almost destroyed, unrecognisable. I did not know the land and I naively did not consider this as a possibility. I felt upset as if it belonged to me! A good reminder that it belonged to nature and its elements, and how fragile and transient life is.



I had to let go of the first wild therapy room and create another one. I was reminded to remain wild in my approach and open to the unpredictability of working in nature, whilst still feeling safe, “at home”. I identified another spot, this time in a very protected part of the woods, under huge yew trees. I have a special relationship with yew trees as they were familiar to me in Italy and have a regular presence in spiritual places in the UK. They are evergreen, therefore, my wild therapy room can benefit from their low branches to create a cosy dark shelter all year around, with some basic logs as seats and some branches. In the middle, some rocks, snail shells, sticks have been gathered. This time I was prepared to consider this as a temporary wild therapy room, that could easily be overtaken by nettles and become inaccessible. To my surprise, the second wild therapy room has weathered the storms and two winters now. I like the fact that there are no doors, it is open to anyone who wish to visit, human and non-human beings! Yet it feels “home” to me and give me an embodied sense of safety. People have made positive comments describing my wild therapy room, as a protected, intimate and homely space. Home-in-nature can come to symbolise the therapeutic alliance (Berger & McLeod, 2006, p. 83).

In my developing ecotherapy practice, the landscape itself and my relationship with this special place have often shaped what happens in ecotherapy sessions and has offered me a loose structure. I tend to start with entering the woods as a way of coming into a different space, relaxing body and mind, reducing stress, an opportunity to get in touch with buried emotions, the intention to engage in often difficult but meaningful conversations. The big tree at the entrance of the woodland is our door to the therapeutic space. A different way to draw some invisible therapeutic boundaries.

As we gently walk through the woods, I often ask to look for something that reflects the topic to focus on, the conversation they would want to have with me and with each other. Or I can ask to collect something for other family members. It seems to help to focus, to find a way to relate the problem to nature. Then, as we come out of the woods there is a bench in a beautiful spot which gives an open view of green, round hills and the sea in the distance. It seems to invite wild and brave conversations with individuals, couples and families. Sometimes my co-explorers might prefer conversations where nature is more in the background or in a more intimate space, so we can move to the wild therapy room under the yew trees. Once again, the space might invite more intimate conversations with my



co-explorers where words can be replaced by objects used as metaphors or arranged as a representation of their own life, family, relationships.

A wild reflecting team

Rewilding my practice has helped me to welcome all weathers and see interruptions as possibilities rather than intrusions, as Jordan and Marshall (2010) highlight “challenging issues for the therapist, in dealing with intrusions from the natural world, such as erratic, difficult weather conditions” (Jordan and Marshall, 2010, p. 349). As I developed a sense of personal safety in nature to manage my own fears and anxiety e.g. the weather, I noticed a greater sense of relational safety and risk taking (Mason, 2005) for both myself and co-explorers.

On one occasion I could not believe how outspoken a young person was with her mother when previously she did not feel she could speak for herself in an online session. Walking and talking and being in the wild therapy room offered a safer context for wild conversations to happen between them. It was also an opportunity for her to say that her father was “a bit like a squirrel”, meaning that he would jump from one branch to another, being quite disengaged with difficulties that his daughters were facing and leaving the mother to make most decisions and carry the emotional load.

In this case and often, I do not know what to expect from ecotherapy sessions, but I trust that nature

will be my co-therapist and will play a significant part in the process. Therefore, I am focused on tuning into myself and my co-explorers through our connection to nature, aware of their needs and preferences, their desired changes, and the agreed therapeutic goals and less preoccupied with having a plan and “doing” something.

In my experience ecotherapy tends to be more relational, more responsive to multiple influences and unpredictable interruptions than in traditional therapy settings. All interruptions or even disruptions during ecotherapy sessions are like visits from the natural world which often carry an important message, a bit like a reflecting team in systemic practice (Andersen, 1987). The reflecting team approach is designed to bring different voices into the therapeutic process and promote multiple perspectives and different positions e.g. speaker, listener, witness, observer who can connect and validate co-explorers’ experiences. The reflecting team approach is also inviting reflecting processes (Andersen, 1992) moving between “inner talks” while listening and “outer talks” while talking (Andersen, 1996). Multiple voices and perspectives can create opportunities for new stories and meanings to emerge. Changing the context to the outdoor, the landscape itself becomes the stage for wild voices to be heard and welcomed. However, with a *wild reflecting team*, there is no control over who and whose voice will be heard, as the natural voices or messages will be unpredictable, yet powerfully relevant.

During ecotherapy sessions we can be interrupted by playful squirrels, an unusual birdsong, some crows flying away, a sky lark hovering over.

On one occasion, I was walking with a co-explorer who said: “I really need to talk to you about something”. She was hesitant... Going round the bushes...I knew it was hard for her to talk.

“What would help you to make it easier to talk about it? What would you want from me?” I asked.

“Your professional advice”, she said.

“Ok, I will wear my professional hat”.

And she continued, “It is about my mental health. It’s serious. It has become worse in lockdown. I need to talk about it. I need help”.

I felt there was a need for me to respond by anticipating some of her fears. “No matter what it is, I will still be proud of you and the work you have done so far”.

I could feel the pain and shame attached to “this thing” but also I felt a deep connection to her, her honesty and her love for nature. Admitting to needing help was a big step for her and a result of many years of therapy. We started walking. However, the wind was so strong that she started shouting to be heard. In this moment of shouting and listening and walking, a horde of crows flew up and swirled over us and I interrupted saying, “Look at that! Imagine being free from all of this worry”. Our conversation carried on in a more sheltered space near the trees. She identified with a particular tree and appeared to feel grounded and safe enough in her body whilst talking. I kept repeating: “You are safe, here, with me and your favourite tree”. She described it at the time as a “moment of magic”, that she was able to savour (Bryant and Veroff, 2007) and go back to this moment at any time when she needed to feel safe. By being attuned to her mood and preoccupations in the moment, using movement and other life forms – the crows and the trees, my words and sounds – she felt the right circumstances came together for her to seize the moment and keep it.



Ecotherapy sessions are often shaped by opportunities in the landscape itself as well as previous experiences of therapy and people's relationship with nature and what they bring on the day. I do not want to impose my own agenda or expectation of interaction with nature and try to offer a space for my co-explorers to find their own way to be in nature that is comfortable. Jordan (2014) in fact, warns therapists against the risk of their own relationship and beliefs about the environment being imposed on co-explorers.

Imagine a continuum. For example, on the one hand, some people have a deep bond with nature and regularly spend time outdoors; therefore, they will be more likely to connect and interact directly with nature, with different elements, with the seasons, with the landscape and its metaphors. In this case nature becomes the primary therapist. On the other hand, some people want nature to be in the background, a place where they can relax into conversations as if they were indoors. From my experience I learnt that, in all cases, co-explorers' relationship/s with nature is a key factor. I have identified the following:

- Neutral – when there is an implicit affinity and unconscious awareness of being part of nature, based on the biophilia hypotheses i.e. the innate capacity for human beings to be attracted to nature and “life and lifelike processes” (Wilson, 1984, p. 1)
- Familiarity with being outdoors – recognising the benefits of being in nature, for some might be a commodity, a place for leisure activities e.g. going to a park to play football, or skate boarding
- Personal – based on an attachment and bonding, feeling part of nature and a sense of belonging, *at home* feeling
- Dialogical – based on a fluency in the language of nature, interacting with natural elements as metaphors, mirroring in a mutual recognition of being part of nature
- Spiritual – based on nature as a place for being in contact with God or a spiritual presence and/or experiencing self as a spiritual being
- Ecological – based on sensitivity about environmental issues and healthy lifestyles, eco-

anxiety and concern for the state of the planet

- Political – based on carrying specific beliefs and being activists in climate change, nature conservation and politics.

My co-explorers will have diverse relationships with nature which are not mutually exclusive and might interact with each other to reflect each person's level of awareness and familiarity of interaction with nature, experiences, stories of being in nature and beliefs about the environment. This often influences the therapeutic process in unpredictable and exciting ways. It can also change over time. Some local families and some participants of an ecotherapy group, have realised that the greenspaces are accessible and available to them at other times too; therefore, ecotherapy can also promote a different relationship with nature that people can enjoy outside therapy as they connect with nature and develop a closer relationship and familiarity with exploring the inner and outer landscapes.

Nature as my co-therapist and primary therapist

Rewilding therapy means also experiencing nature as a co-therapist and be open to the healing power of nature, and relying less on my own ideas, plans and techniques. Practicing in nature is not simply transferring therapy outdoors, but becoming active in the process, as nature is not only the setting in which therapy occurs but also a partner in the process (Berger and McLeod, 2006). Jordan and Hinds (2016) describe nature as the third party in the therapeutic process or a 3-way relationship between co-explorer, therapist and nature, “a tripartite therapeutic partnership” (Hegarty, 2010, p. 66). Hegarty (2010) also claims that the role of the therapist is to be a facilitator, watching, holding the space from a distance, letting go of their control to rely more on trust and intuition, and nature becoming the primary therapist with its healing power.



Being mindful of and trusting nature as a co-therapist has allowed me to initiate some conversations as well as *stepping out of the way and let the conversations unfold without interference* as a parent described it to me, an example of nature becoming the primary therapist. I now see myself as a minimalist therapist, peripheral and de-centred to allow the power of nature to do its magic. I suggest that working in nature allows a more flexible positioning, where the therapist can move freely between different positions e.g. an observer and facilitator, responsible for holding the therapeutic space as well as a participant and witness from a meta-perspective and trusting the healing power of nature in which we all become immersed. This latter could be regarded as a third order positioning.

I often reflect on whether working in nature allows a different pace in the therapeutic process, a

different depth and lightness at the same time; it can feel like going on a fast track and pace whilst slowing down the process and reducing the number of words needed to enter a meaningful therapeutic conversation. On several occasions, one off ecotherapy meeting with couples or families have made enough difference to them that they did not need further meetings or reduced the frequency to once a month or every two months. Sometimes, the process of therapy seems to be like a quiet, yet powerfully strong stream of fresh water, moving through the rocks and free flowing towards its own course. Since I was a systemic trainee, I kept an inner mantra alive to help me relax into the therapeutic process: "Go with the flow". I now feel like it happens often in ecotherapy meetings, where the therapeutic process will just flow where it is needed and nature will take care of us all.

It has been liberating to trust that nature will offer containment when needed, will hold silences as well as powerful shouting or whispering and will inspire wild conversations. On one occasion, I invited my co-explorer to shout out all her anger and her determination to shut down her critical voice, full of fear and constant worry, in order to honour her resolve to become less tolerant of its unreasonable demands. She said that she was worried about frightening the birds. Another day I invited her to do the same, and she did. I found myself joining her in the shouting, in spite of being worried about people in the distance hearing us. It felt like another "*moment of magic*" as if we were both standing against the tyranny of the self-critical voice. She thanked me for this, and I am sure I would not have done it indoors, within four walls, even if I was in my therapy room at home.

Considering nature as a co-therapist leads also to a co-created process within a more egalitarian and collaborative space than in a traditional therapy setting, in spite of the asymmetry of power in the therapeutic relationship. In my experience, working in nature also facilitates children having more of a voice and sharing their understanding of relationships through metaphors and objects from nature. Children and adults can have powerful conversations whilst the focus is on creating a visual representation or searching, collecting and creating natural objects. This could be about mapping relationships within families, representing their position in the family, making natural vibes sticks to develop empathy for each other, talking about worries through rocks or sticks, having a chat with each other about a relevant topic or creating something in pairs, for example, a parent and a child, or a sibling group, so that a more equal power and shared language can be used to express



themselves. Searching, creating, showing and talking become all part of the same process of sharing, communicating and sense-making in nature.

What rewilding means to me

Rewilding has been about re-discovering my inner landscape of wildness. I reflected that I have been trained and tamed to become an *English therapist*, a bit like having to wear a therapy cloak to cover my exuberant Italianness, tame my impatient ways of interrupting and my own rhythm in conversation with others, worrying about if and when, sharing my own thinking and emotions in a dialogical flow, tussling with the idea of personal space and the “right” physical and emotional distance with my co-explorers, in order to develop a well-tamed English therapist self (Santin, 2018).

By practising in nature, I have been wondering: Can I dare to be freer from ways of being a therapist where I learnt to conform, through training and constraining work contexts (e.g. social care) and finding ways of accessing all of myself; my body, mind, heart, spirit; my life in Italy, my life in the UK; my way of relating, my life skills and experiences? Can I dare to use my whole embedded and embodied self (Hardham, 1996) in a way that can benefit my co-explorers and help them achieve therapeutic change? Can I feel safe enough to explore new ways of being and practicing? Can I dare to be a wild therapist in the same way I wished to be a playful and cheeky child and get away with it?

The awareness of being part of the infinite web of life, wisdom, ideas, freely emerging in ecotherapy sessions has been liberating for my systemic practice. I rediscovered nature as being intertwined with my body-sense, my professional identity and style as a therapist. In nature I feel more grounded, more present and connected to Life and to myself, my whole self, including my spiritual self, which often felt hidden or inaccessible in the past. Working in nature and rewilding my practice can be associated with what Shotter (2010, p. 2) describes as the interplay of “the spontaneous”, the “living activities”, the bodily experience, the expressiveness which invite responsiveness; these elements become alive all at once and the therapist is sometimes a doer, sometime the witness in this process of dynamic unfolding. I have noticed that by being more connected to my body in nature, my co-explorers are also more in touch with their own bodily sensations and embodied emotions as Brazier (2018, p. 17) states “By observing and experiencing the therapist’s embodiedness, the co-explorer also learns to connect to his own body-sense”. When I am with my co-explorers, all experiencing the aliveness and connectedness with nature, ecotherapy can be transformative and have a magical, dynamic and emerging quality. As Karen Barad says:

The world and its possibilities for becoming are remade with each moment. Meeting each moment, being alive to the possibilities of becoming, is an ethical call, an invitation that is written into the very matter of all beings and becoming.

(Barad, 2007, p. 396)

Rewilding my practice has helped me re-define therapy as moments, moments of meaningful conversations and exploration, moments of silence and reflections and “moments of magic” that have the potential to be therapeutic, i.e. they contain the seed for change as they can open up new possibilities and new “ways of becoming” in relationships. Change for my co-explorers is more like an invisible wind, a gentle dance, a movement, a subtle shift within our inner landscape in response to the outer landscape of words, actions, conversations and interactions with nature. I often experience

what Andersen (1996, p. 121) says: “Some words touch the speaker such that the listener can see the talker be moved”. It is often felt by both. I feel moved inside, I recognise it in my inner landscape. My co-explorers too. In Shotter’s words (2010, p. 2) “Something very special occurs when two or more living beings meet and begin to respond to each other (more happens than them merely having an impact on one other)”. Shotter, in fact, talks about surprising changes, changes that happen spontaneously, associated with amazement and wonder and, therefore, extraordinary as they are qualitatively different. Using one of my co-explorer’s words:

My sessions in the woods with Chiara always surprise me in how deep, moving and life shifting they can be. I love nature and so being outdoors for therapy is a gift. It’s not just the sessions that are powerful, but their effects continue afterwards and are changing our family life positively. I don’t know how that happens. It feels a bit like magic but it IS happening...

Rewilding my practice has also allowed my creativity to run wild. Therapy has become more like a green canvas, similar to when I start painting and I do not know what I am going to paint but the canvas is nature itself. Ecotherapy is an experiential endeavour mediated by nature and its metaphors, more powerful than any conversation, a dialogical space for new meanings to emerge beyond words. In nature, I experience a different kind of connection with my co-explorers, similar to what Shotter writes,

Words do not *do* anything on their own; they do not stand for things, nor represent ideas. They have a meaning only in those situations in which living human beings make some *use* of them in relating themselves to other human beings. In these situations, living people bodily respond to each other’s utterances and voicings, and in so doing, not only do they *relate* themselves to each other, but they also *relate* themselves to their surroundings.

(Shotter, 2010, p. 44)

This experience of words taking meaning in a relational context and from the surroundings makes practicing in nature inherently more relational than in clinical settings, promoting relationally responsive understanding and meaning making beyond language. Duncan (2017) suggests that the primacy of the *creatural or imaginal* invites us to recognize and appreciate the non-verbal and non-linear intelligence beyond the constraints of logical thinking and conceptual language.

In fact, in ecotherapy sessions, language and words can become redundant; interacting with nature can be meaning-rich beyond words. English being my second language, it has been liberating to rely less on verbal language and more on metaphors; just a few words can sometimes access powerful meanings. One day a co-explorer started our conversation saying that she was totally exhausted and how parenting their 6-year-old adopted son was intensely challenging. As we just entered the dark woods, I felt like “entering” into the word “exhausting”, connecting to her emotions and stories embedded in that word. I experienced in that moment what Andersen (1996, p. 121) states “*There are always emotions in the words, there are other words in the words, sometimes sounds and music in them, sometimes whole stories, sometimes whole lives*”. As we were standing by one of the more majestic trees in the woodland, I asked her: “What do you need?” She said: “I need to hide”. I invited her to look for a hiding place around her and she chose a hole at the roots of the big tree. I asked her again: “What do you need inside?” She started collecting a few leaves, some moss, rocks and sticks. I

picked up a few soft feathers to offer. She arranged all of them to create a soft bed, a rock as a door, a stick to signpost a dwelling. I asked her to imagine giving herself some rest. It felt like a “moment of magic”, much more powerful than many words to describe the nature of her exhaustion, how she could find some solace in nature and renew her commitment to taking care of herself.



The seeds of Ecotherapy: my journey towards “coming home” through nature

We all have some stories to tell about nature. Mine take me back to my childhood in Italy. When I was a young child, I used to get up in the middle of the night to watch the stars whilst everybody was asleep. I felt scared but terribly excited, like a small creature lost in the immensity of the dark sky but, strangely, I felt safe. Similarly, being near the high peaks of the Alps where I grew up, the majesty of the rocks, the wild flowers growing in the cracks and the mysterious forests, the abundance of water gathering in joyous streams and pristine lakes, were a deeply spiritual experience. It was also an escape into a world of peace and beauty. Yes, nature has always been my safe place and my spiritual home, based on a special emotional bond.

I have been reflecting on my personal intergenerational stories about migration and emotional homelessness linked to a longing for a “home”, which could offer some comfort or a hiding place for shame (Santin, 2016). One way of describing my ongoing personal and professional journey so far has been like “coming home”, exploring my inner landscape through nature and my rediscovered sense of self as a person and as a therapist. This has become like the seeds of my ecotherapy practice, taking therapy outdoors to maximise the benefits of being and interacting with nature in a therapeutic way.

During the lockdown, as I started going regularly for walks in nature and exploring new places, many memories started surfacing. I remember as a child, spending a lot of time with my primary school friend who lived near the countryside on the outskirts of my village. We created a little den in the nearby wood and spent most of our time there. It was such a special and peaceful place, a sanctuary, a safe home, in nature. Memories of nature from my life in Italy have become increasingly present in my embodied sense of safety. Yet, my journey towards feeling safe in nature in the UK has been a long one. I moved to the UK 23 years ago. I noticed how my body was not able to fully relax when outdoors, often telling me that it was not safe for me to be in such an unfamiliar place. The air and smells were different. The landscape and the wet weather were keeping me at a distance from the outdoors. In addition to this, there was always a worry at the back of my mind whether it is safe enough for me, as a woman, to visit green spaces on my own, as well as having a general fear of being treated unkindly

as “a foreigner”, especially after Brexit, worrying that somebody would make a remark or tell me off for something I had or had not done. This is also a reminder of how access to nature can reflect social positioning and inequality as different groups in society might experience this as a privilege or as marginalisation and denial of a common good e.g. nature. I recognise that it is a privilege for me to have easy access to nature on my doorstep, and to benefit from my past experiences of connection through nature, which has led to an embodied feeling of peace and safety, a sense of “coming home” to my inner self. This feels even more like a privilege as I reflect on the dangerous and deadly migration journeys, all over the world, across Europe, its Mediterranean Sea and the UK Channel, a desperate attempt for survival, a simple longing for a place of safety and a home for the future...

I always loved photography as a way of remembering places I have been, a way of keeping them alive in my memory. Bryant and Veroff (2007) suggest that savouring positive emotional experiences has the effect of reliving the experience and deepening it. Taking photos in nature and revisiting them later has helped me savouring moments in nature when I am elsewhere. It allows me to recall body sensations, emotions, thoughts associated with meaningful moments of connection, which, in turn, enhance my sense of



embodied self and connection to life and other life forces. This savouring for me is not just a cognitive act of remembering, of accessing memories from the past; it is rather a process of imagining being again in places, with people, reliving the sensory experiences associated with them.

I found this idea and practice useful for myself and those I work with, particularly during the pandemic. It could be argued that human bodies have become accustomed to being activated by fear of catching the virus, with the capacity to self-regulate (behavioural and emotional states) being tested (Porges, 2020). This is compounded by the biological need for connection to self and others which would (usually) promote calm and connectedness (Porges, 2020) but has been interrupted by the impact of the pandemic. My experience of taking therapy outdoors in the past two years confirms that people can appreciate feeling calmer and more connected to self, their body and others in nature. This is not necessarily about the amount of time spent outdoors but the quality of connection to nature, between people and their environment and with others (Richardson, et al., 2021). I agree with Lengieza and Swim’s definition of connectedness in nature as recognising the experience of oneness with nature and a blurring of boundaries between self and nature and a form of self-transcendence (Lengieza and Swim, 2021).

My experience of reconnecting with nature as a safe and even spiritual place in the UK, a “coming home” journey, has helped me feeling safe in nature as a person *and* as a therapist. I feel connected to my embodied sense of self, to my cultural roots, open to emotional connection with people and nature. Safety is a key factor in any form of psychotherapy, however in ecotherapy I am invited to

constantly balance it with taking risks and be open to the unpredictability of what is emerging in the conversation and the environment itself. This could involve rain, the blowing of the wind, the uneven or muddy path, all of which could influence what happens in ecotherapy sessions. Therefore, Mason's concept of safe uncertainty (1993, 2019) usefully points to how safety can co-exist with uncertainty and can promote experimenting with rewilding therapy as a way of taking relational risks (Mason, 2005) and feeling safe in creating and exploring new territories.

Rewilding in the conservation world and therapeutic practice

Rewilding in conservation biology is a process of letting nature find its own balance through minimal human intervention e.g. re-introducing wild animals. In some cases, it can be controversial as it may conflict with how the land is distributed and used, reducing the economic benefits for farmers who need to earn a livelihood. There are also many rewilding projects that are experimenting with minimal human interventions into natural habitats, to allow nature to re-generate itself and promote wildlife and biodiversity. I have the privilege to be part of one of these projects which is local to me. The idea of rewilding has also been used to think about bringing change into education by providing learning opportunities for home schooling and leisure time through outdoor activities for children and adults to help them reconnect with nature. For example Project Rewild in Sussex suggests a definition of rewilding as,

a way of supporting the land and sea to return to a better sense of balance, of giving space for the land to recover, of standing back and letting nature heal itself. Rewilding is a way of relinquishing human control, of repositioning humans so that we are a part of – and not apart from – nature. Rewilding is a way to help nature to thrive.

Daniel Ford

Working therapeutically in nature is not new. Many psychotherapists and counsellors from a variety of modalities, have been working outdoors. Common features are the relevance of symbolism and synchronicity, the use of metaphors, the interaction between interior and exterior landscapes (Jordan, 2009) and the mirroring between psyche and nature (Rust, 2009). Within a psychodynamic frame, some claim that the synchronicity with other-than-human can deepen the therapeutic relationship (Totton, 2012), whilst others question this assumption and suggest that, when working in nature, it is difficult to assess its impact on the therapeutic relationship (Harris, 2018). Key findings of reviewing some research papers suggest that working in nature offers stabilisation of distress. There is more focus on relationship building and using nature metaphors to create new narratives and new meanings (Cooley et al., 2019). However, most psychotherapists and counsellors work with individuals and/or groups. I therefore question what ecotherapy looks like for systemic and family psychotherapists working with couples and families. Roger Duncan, a biologist and systemic psychotherapist (2017) urges to consider Bateson's ideas of the *Creatural* and the *Imaginal*. *Creatural* is the natural tendency towards ecological and human wholeness and self-healing e.g. body capacity for self-healing, constant adaptations and regeneration. Totton (2011, p. 1), a psychodynamic body psychotherapist, claims that "therapy is by nature wild: but a lot of at the moment is rather tame". He defines *Wild Therapy* as the attempt to challenge psychotherapy to include and embrace the other-than-human and more-than-human world, and the ethical imperative to take care of all the beings in the universe. He advocates a connection to the "wild mind", a state of awareness and shift in ecological consciousness that

recognises us all as being connected with the world and all beings, to challenge the process of domestication of our lives.

Ecotherapy as world therapy

In my personal and professional life I always wonder about new ways of balancing hope and despair (Flaskas and McCarthy, 2007). It has inspired and given impetus to my ecotherapy practice with families, and I have become part of a biodiversity project, whose aim is to mobilise the local community in rewilding and regenerate a neglected green space.

Some professionals in the systemic field have started to explore what the role of systemic therapy is in this unprecedented combination of crises, in which we are sometimes perpetrators or victims, and sometimes both because there are other social and economic structures in place which value, for



example, white lives over Black lives and are invested in socioeconomic imbalance remaining unequal. Overall, the systemic profession is in state of collective denial by failing to consider the larger ecological systems and context. And, as both Hugh Palmer and Phil Kearney point out in their papers (Kearney, 2021; Palmer, 2021), the systemic therapy community has been selective in which theoretical roots of our profession we care to remember and act with. We are failing to embrace fully an ecosystemic epistemology. We are in an emergency which requires an ethical commitment to future generations (Kearney, 2021).

It is time to acknowledge that this crisis is a systemic issue that requires systemic change. Simon (2021) suggests that we are in a *panmorphic crisis* where the disruption in all areas of our lives i.e. social, health, climate, has already happened and is happening. There is no way back. We cannot restore old ways of thinking and practising which have embedded social inequalities and injustice for centuries. Nor should we as we risk recolonising our practices with all the historic ways of thinking and doing, many of which need discarding and critiquing. The Black Lives Matter movement encourages people

to embrace the disruption of the philosophical domination by western anthropocentric theories, a real change of direction in our ways of knowing and being in our lives, away from colonising and pathologising practices. If we recognise that we are living in “transmaterial worlds”, then perhaps we can see the interconnectedness of matter, humans and non-humans - all entangled with each other. We can become part of “transmaterial worlding” – making our worlds through an active and emerging process of transformation of our existence and membership; creating alternative ways of being to disrupt the process of privileging certain voices and stories over others (Simon and Salter, 2019, 2020). Simon and Salter state, “Transmaterial worlding requires that we re-think our relations with-in our environment, that we re-position ourselves from in-habiting the world or co-habiting (both separate us from other materiality) to co-inhabiting” (2019, p. 8).

In the current political context, there have been many public inquiries and good intentions, many recommendations and apologies; many books, and academic papers. Yet Black Lives Matter and COP26 are reminders of our failure to bring about meaningful and structural changes to make a positive difference in people’s lives. I am aware of my many privileges, like being White, cisgender, having an education, having some wealth, living in a good house, having a profession that is giving me a position of personal and economic power, a status in society, and even writing this article is a privilege. If we don’t directly take a stance against oppression and other forms of injustice then we join the discourse and practice of. As McGoldrick says, “Each day, with each intervention, if I am not part of the solution, then I am part of the problem” (McGoldrick, 1994, p. 152).

Open ended Conclusion

Nobody can any longer deny that our current crisis is affecting all areas of our lives, i.e. a “panmorphic crisis”, locally and globally, including our systemic community (Simon, 2021). What can we offer to the world of psychotherapy and activism at this challenging time? How are systemic ideas, theories, and concepts helpful in the way we think about life on the planet, the current pandemic and the increasing extent of mental health needs? And do they go far enough in trying to respond to the current call for action and systemic change? What would ecosystemic therapy look like if we start working with children, young people, couples and families in nature, considering us all embedded in a complex interplay of wider communities, social, political, cultural, ecological contexts?

In the past few years, in response to a calling for action, my commitment to a quiet activism has led to rewilding my systemic practice with individuals, couples and families. Exploring new inner and outer landscapes has been challenging and exciting in equal measure. I have been through a personal and professional journey towards feeling safe in nature and taking therapy outdoors, a journey of “coming home” whilst recognising my wildness. I reclaimed my own experiences of home making into experimenting with being an exterior designer and creating a protected, yet wild, space in the woods i.e. a wild therapy room. This is part of a process of re-thinking therapeutic boundaries, re-defining therapy itself as a co-created process of exploring and engaging in inner and outer landscapes as co-explorers. I have been reclaiming some of my indigenous knowledge and experiences of my life in Italy and my bond with nature so that I am better able to access my whole embedded and embodied self (Hardham, 1996) and to be more present and connected to the aliveness and healing power of nature when I am with my co-explorers.

Practising in nature has allowed me to trust nature as a co-therapist and often as a primary therapist in a therapeutic process which is based on relating to one another as human beings and to the other-than-human world. Rewilding my systemic practice means letting go of many plans, ideas, and constraints and consider nature as a safe space to explore old and new inner and outer landscapes and stay with the unfamiliar and unpredictable whilst feeling “at home” in the wild.

Nature is non-binary; it embraces opposites with courage and grace. The power imbalance between co-explorers and therapists and the power of language are mitigated by nature. I have been learning how powerful natural metaphors can be to promote meaningful and potentially transformative conversations about life and relationships. Speaking through natural objects, letting the landscape or the voices of nature influence the course of a conversation, allowing nature to play its part, have been liberating and nurturing for me towards becoming a minimalist, wild therapist.

I have witnessed many *moments of magic* in ecotherapy explorations where change seems to happen in subtle, yet powerful ways. There is lightness even when talking about worries through the metaphor of heavy rocks. There is depth even when talking about a tree, or a flower, or gathering some natural objects to express unbearable feelings or untold stories when words are hard to find. In nature, therapy becomes more like a green canvas, a free flow of ideas, wisdom, aliveness and strength that can open up and even speed up the therapeutic process. In nature there is space for stillness as well as movement, silence and words, all in harmony, like a dance suspended in time and yet feeling so present with each other and with any wild message that nature wishes to give.



With “moments of magic” come moments of despair too about the gravity of the current crisis which we cannot deny any longer. Here it comes also the responsibility for shaping and reshaping our lives and systemic practices. Karen Barad (2007, p. 390) states, “We are responsible for the world of which we are part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped.”

Practising ecotherapy in nature with a wild reflecting team of birds, wild animals, trees, whilst picking up some rubbish on the way out of the woods, might be a daring metaphor for giving voice to the most silenced and marginalised experiences in our communities, including our profession and wider socio-political contexts. I am reminded that we damaged the environment in such a way that we cannot disentangle plastic from our lives, it is even in the fish we may eat, in the oceans, in the air we breathe, everywhere; therefore as I walk into green spaces and see cans of beer or plastic bottles or any other polluting rubbish, I can decide to ignore, or complain or pick it up.

Matter and what matters - whose voices we listen to and how we respond - can include many parts of our "universe": trees, plants, mosses, plastic (and other) waste, drugs we pass through our systems and into the water table of the earth, chemicals which benefit, sedate or annihilate entire communities with growing medical punctuation of social and political problems. We are waking daily to long lists of interconnected environmental matters and in an ongoing state of shock or denial or compliance.

Simon & Salter (2019, p. 9)

As it happens in nature, messages from the natural world can become useful interruptions and even disruptions to welcome unexpected voices. My rewilding journey has just started. I welcome anyone to join, to explore new ways of being in the world, to be systemic thinkers and hopeful dreamers based on our own wildness, to share our indigenous knowledges and wisdom based on respect and reciprocity rather than othering. We are both hosts and guests in nature, longing for a safe wild home and a peaceful posture for a collective onward journey.

Acknowledgements

Some words of thanks to all my co-explorers for offering me the privilege of sharing moments of magic in our work in nature. All examples and photographs in woods local to me in this paper were taken by me and reproduced with the permission of participants. Other photos are sourced from iStock.

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Citation

Santin, Chiara (2021). Rewilding Systemic Practice. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 4(1), 13-31. <https://doi.org/10.28963/4.1.3>