

A Therapeutic Relationship Between People and Their Geography in the Andes

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For the past seven years I have been involved in a research project with indigenous people who live in isolated villages in the high Andes of Peru, near the old Inca capital of Cuzco. One of the more striking aspects of their lives is the therapeutic way in which they interact with their geography. They engage in meditative-like processes that experientially connect them to nature and that establish a loving and mutually supportive relationship with the non-human world around them. Within this relationship they can call upon their geography to serve as a therapeutic resource for problem resolution and personal growth, and this in turn leads to a sense of intimate connection to the Cosmos, which has additional therapeutic effects. I will begin by describing their world view from the perspective of one standing within it, and then move to my more familiar stance as a Western psychologist trying to make sense of a philosophical tradition that has little in common with our own.

Many of the meditations I have encountered in the Andes involve interacting with elements of nature (e.g. the earth, a river, a tree) with specific therapeutic outcomes in mind. The actual process for connecting with nature--for example a river--was translated as 'blending your spirit with the spirit of the river'. The way to accomplish this blending is through 'intent'. Several different definitions are possible for the term, a useful one is to think of 'intent' as 'sincere pretending'. Through this process of 'sincere pretending' subjectively real experiences emerge. After experiencing the meditations for a period of time I found that the 'pretending' aspect began to recede in favor of an experiential understanding of 'intent' and how to evoke it.

The selection of which element of nature with which to connect depends upon the type of effect that is desired. For example, sitting quietly on the bank of a river you can connect your spirit with that of the river and have your worries, neuroses, and various other problems be gently washed downstream. You can sit with your back against a tree and connect with it to learn how to work with vertical (transcendent) energy, and how to keep rooted while reaching for the stars. You can stand in the wind and can ask it to help you expand your consciousness. As the sun rises in the morning you can ask it to help you focus and mobilize your energy for the tasks you face during the day, while at sunset it can help you diffuse your energy in preparation for entering the mysteries of the evening (the unconscious and dream time).

Specific to the Andean geography are the 'Apus', the great spiritual beings who are the major mountain peaks in the area around Cuzco. The Apus evolve spiritually, and when they do they grow an inch during the night. Consequently, high mountain peaks are some of the greatest spiritual beings on the planet. It is possible to connect your spirit with the Apus, with the effect depending upon the nature and role in the Cosmos of that particular Apu (e.g. one Apu creates order out of the energy of the universe while a different Apu rips that order apart).

Of all the aspects of nature the one that plays the greatest role in the processes I learned is the 'Pachamama', the great mother who is the planet earth. A simple meditation for beginning an exploration of these processes is to find an appropriate place to sit on the earth, and then just experience sitting in the lap of the Pachamama, the way a child experiences sitting in the lap of a perfectly loving and nourishing mother. Another meditation is to lie on the ground, bare your navel to

the earth, and then give the Pachamama all of your problems and worries, or ask her to give you what you need to solve your problems within yourself. These simple processes can lead to peaceful and supportive experiences.

Relationships are bi-directional, and thus within this approach there is a corresponding responsibility for humans to reciprocate the love and nourishment offered by nature. All of the ceremonies I attended in the Andes involved 'despachos', offerings made to various aspects of nature, particularly the Pachamama. These offerings are not payments or bribes to nature for favors granted or requested; they are instead a nourishing of a relationship, as a lover gives flowers to a beloved. This has, in turn, evoked within me and many others involved in this project a greater desire to support the health and well-being of all of nature, not as a moral obligation but as a natural act of caring for a loved one.

In addition to the benefits of calling upon specific aspects of geography for specific therapeutic effects, another level of benefit arises from the general relationship with nature that is engendered by these processes. All of these meditations presuppose that nature can and will support and nourish us; that the earth will absorb our problems, that the river will take away our anxieties, that the wind will expand our consciousnesses, and that a tree will help us become enlightened. This can evoke a strong sense of validation and support for our existence, as children of nature, compared to what we may experienced as children of Western society. This, in turn, can assuage issues of purpose, meaning, belonging, and connection to life.

This concludes my description of the experience of this Andean approach, now I would like to turn to the issue of the actual validity of the world view which supports these experiences. Within psychology there are many ways to explain the therapeutic effects of the meditations without having to believe that there really are spirits to be found in nature. For example, one approach is to view the meditations and resulting experiences within the framework of how we project elements of ourselves upon other people and other things. Another approach is to view the meditations as therapeutic metaphors, where we experience the river as being able to wash away our worries because that is what rivers mean to us, they wash things away. While these approaches serve the logic of science, they also move us away from the beauty of the experience (its true essence), as analytic thinking often does. We could, instead, accept the existence of a spirit in the river as being literally true, and believe that it is willing to aid us within the context of a loving relationship. We seem to be faced with these two options; that the meditations have an effect because we experience reality 'as if' the river had a spirit, or that the river 'really does' have a spirit.

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in his efforts to approach the issue of the sacred (in R.E. Donaldson, ed., *A Sacred Unity*, 1991, pp. 265-270), directly addresses this dichotomy. He points out that in the 1500's Catholics and Protestants were killing each other over just such a choice, arguing about whether the wine of the Mass 'really is' the blood of Christ, or just 'stands for' the blood of Christ. Bateson proposes that both viewpoints are in some sense anti-sacred, that the sacred lies in coming at the issue from another direction. It calls for a mode of thought that is unconcerned with the Aristotelian distinction of true or false--so emphasized in both science and Western religion--and is instead concerned with beauty, harmony, health, and the sacred. This other mode of thought is curiously slippery to conscious analysis and is inexpressible by prose. We know this mode, however, for we use it when we enter a theater, approach a work of art, stand at a vista and view a sunset, or sit with our backs against a tree.

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