

Review of *Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche* by Bill Plotkin

Brian Stafford

Founder, *Eco-Psyche-Artistry*, Nosara, Costa Rica.
 Founder, *Wilderness Is Medicine*, Tabernash, Colorado.

W*ild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche* (2013, published by New World Library) is Dr. Plotkin's third book and a welcome addition to his growing contributions to ecopsychology, depth psychology, ecotherapy, and The Great Turning. Plotkin, who is on the editorial board of the journal *Ecopsychology*, is a former academic psychologist who studied abnormal states of consciousness and then left that world for private practice and to become a wilderness guide. He is the founder of the Animas Valley Institute in Durango, Colorado, whose mission

in its widest scope, is to contribute to cultural transformation by fostering nature-based personal development and thus the maturation of individuals and the human species. We support each participant to access and embody the world-changing and vital creativity at his or her core. (Animas Valley Institute, 2013)

My goal in reviewing this work is threefold: (1) to offer a summary of this book, (2) to provide an analysis of its many strengths, and some limitations and cautionary notes where warranted, and (3) with my own personal account, to attempt to "ensoul" this book review.

Summary

Plotkin's first book, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche* (2003), describes his perspective of the descent to soul and the underworld journey and includes the practices that he and colleagues have gathered over 30 years to facilitate that quest. His second book, *Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World* (2007), may eventually be

seen as *the* foundational work of this new eco-depth psychology that is springing forth. In that essential and weighty volume, he presents his eight-stage model, known as the Soulcentric Developmental Wheel, that describes the life cycle of the ego and soul for individuals and how mature individuals renew and heal their cultures. It is a visionary and masterful integrative narrative of developmental, analytic, descriptive, archetypal, eco- and cultural psychology fleshed onto the four directions and seasons and perfused with indigenous and perennial models of wisdom. His Soulcentric Developmental Wheel serves as the broad framework by which one understands the place of his first book and this book. *Soulcraft* describes Stages 4 and 5 of the soul and ego's journey, while *Wild Mind* serves as a preparatory guide for those in Stage 3 as well as a field manual to be employed once one has descended and needs further Self-healing and Wholing in order to "become visionary participants in and proponents of an evolving world" (p. 243).

In approaching this book, let us remember that what is promised in the title is a field guide. Field guides, most generally, are portable books created by a naturalist that include a local and/or regional map, photos, drawings, descriptions, markings, as well as the likely location of fauna, flora, minerals, or geological strata in a specific natural region. Their purpose is to help those unfamiliar with this habitat begin to identify local residents and differentiate look-alikes (tasty mushrooms versus poisonous ones), and to provide an elementary understanding of relationships between inhabitants. A field guide is neither a laminated illustration of local fauna or flora nor is it a scientific identification manual. It is designed to be portable, browsable, and usable.

Given this definition, Plotkin delivers exactly what is promised: a unique work that approaches being a self-help manual, a travel guide to the ego and psyche, and an offering of eco-practices that reside somewhere between, as well as beyond, "natural ecotherapy" and

“clinical ecotherapy.” It also never veers from its purpose of preparing individuals through Wholing and Self-healing for the eventual “descent to Soul.”

For readers wanting more objective and research-based work, you’d be advised to look elsewhere. But if a reader is looking for an integrated and holistic look at the human ego and its relationship to both its capacity and its fragmentation in a format that is understandable and useful to educated readers, even those with only a slim background in psychology or ecology, this guide fulfills its promise. One can also imagine this paperback book being stuffed into a backpack along with *Adventure Journal* (Hostetter, 2004) with which it, perhaps not coincidentally, shares the cover photo.

The introduction, the overview (Chapter 1) and the book in its entirety call upon us to “reclaim these essential [inner] human capacities of the Self” as the “highest priority in psychology, education, religion, medicine, and leadership development ... [in order] to wake up, rise up, and become genuine agents of cultural transformation—and, in the bargain, experience the most profound fulfillment of a lifetime” (p. 4). The primary orienting generalization of this guide comes from the following seeding statement: “the key to healing and wholing is not suppressing symptoms, eliminating wounds, or eradicating subpersonalities but, rather, cultivating our wholeness” (p. 21). The remainder of the introduction introduces Plotkin’s philosophy and break with mainstream Western psychology. Plotkin focuses on what he sees as lacking in Western psychology, medicine, education, and religion, namely, “these untapped human resources of mature sensing, feeling, imagination, and thinking” and “promoting health and wholeness rather than on (merely) suppressing pathology and fragmentedness” (p. 29). The introduction concludes with a call to “rewild psychology” by allowing “nature itself to be the primary guide” (p. 8). Within the current dialogue in the broad field of ecopsychology in general and this journal specifically, this field guide also includes a somewhat seamless introduction and rather invisible integration of aspects of topophilia, nature language, radical ecopsychology, ecotherapy practice, as well as including the ecological unconscious, the phenomenology of the sensory, interdependency between human and non-human, and transpersonal and transcendental spirituality (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Fisher, 2013). This is achieved without naming the “disciplines” and risking alienating the non-academic reader.

Plotkin provides an overview of the psyche in Chapter 1 by including both the map’s legend and initial definitions and descriptions of his cartography known as the Nature-Based Map of the Human Psyche. In the Horizontal Plane he places both the Self and the Subpersonalities; along the Vertical Axis lie Spirit (above) and Soul (below), and in the Center he places the Ego. Each cardinal direction is

the home of an aspect of mature wholeness, known as a facet, and also an immature subpersonality of the Self, known as a fragment. Plotkin briefly describes how he sees the ego operating and provides introductory descriptions of these “residents” of the Psyche. There are two visual maps provided, each with an inner circle (fragments or subs) and an outer circle of wholeness (facets). The first map consists of an Intrapersonal View of the Self and the second map the Interpersonal View. The maps, available at <http://www.wildmindbook.com/the-book/diagrams>, are Plotkin’s medicine wheel, fleshed-out versions of the original four shields maps of the School of Lost Borders (Foster & Little, 1999). A new contribution to his eco-, depth, and transpersonal psychology is his naming and describing the three-dimensional ego, the “3-D ego.” This ego resides in the center of the mature map and refers “to an Ego blessed with some degree of conscious communion and integration with Self, Soul, and Spirit” (p. 15). Plotkin’s use of 3-D is helpful in describing how the ego can operate in maturing individuals, but a better term might actually be a 4-D ego, including time as the fourth dimension, since the 3-D ego that Plotkin describes is also aware of how the subpersonalities came to develop over time and also somewhat aware of its future unfolding.

As previously stated, Plotkin places a unique “resident” of wholeness and fragmentation in each direction of the horizontal plane. Each resident also has a unique history, capacities, archetypes, functions, and interrelationship with the other “residents” of the map. The process of Wholing is offered first since the author sees it as “foundational” (p. 27) and it “enables us to understand both the limitations and the gifts of our wounded or fragmented subpersonalities” (p. 26), as well as the ability to Self-heal from our own Wholeness.

Chapters 2–9 consist of thoughtful and well-delineated descriptions of the following facets of wholeness (2–5) and subpersonalities (6–9):

- (2) North: The Nurturing Generative Adult
- (3) South: The Wild Indigenous One
- (4) East: The Innocent/Sage
- (5) West: The Muse-Beloved
- (6) North: Loyal Soldiers
- (7) South: Wounded Children
- (8) East: Addicts and Escapists
- (9) West: The Shadow and Shadow Selves

Each wholeness chapter follows a similar outline: An apropos poem or excerpt that characterizes the resident of the map precedes a description and a human exemplar of the characteristics of that trait. Further explication of the facet and the quality of love it embodies comes next, and a differentiation between the specific facet and a commonly confused understanding of that facet’s quality follows

(e.g., in the North, Caregiving vs. Caretaking). Plotkin describes this facet's contribution to healthy relationships with humans, more than humans, and culture. A description of how this quality emerges in childhood and adolescence is described for each and, finally, emblematic archetypes are named and described. In Plotkin's model, each direction and archetype or quality is also associated with a "primary window of knowing," and nature-based practices for cultivating this quality (facets of Self) are offered to the reader: North: Deep Heart-Centered Thinking; East: Deep Full-Presence Sensing; South: Full-Bodied Emotion; West: Deep Imagination. Finally, Plotkin places each facet in the vertical dimension of the map and delineates the role that facet and window of knowing plays in the descent to soul or the ascent to spirit.

The chapters devoted to the fragments are similarly designed but with greater explication of the subpersonalities and how they likely developed as a defensive function and how they act as immature versions of the facet found in the same direction. One of Plotkin's frames is that the key to Self-healing from Wholeness is the approach of loving and celebrating the fragment for the way it, indeed, served us during our development. The end of each chapter includes both "basic" and "advanced" subpersonality work for Self-healing, which he describes as "cultivating awareness of our subpersonalities from the compassionate perspective of the Self, and ... honing our ability to continue functioning from the Self when one of our subpersonalities tries to take over" (p. 125). One difference from the facet chapters is that in the fragment chapters the offerings are primarily "journal-based" invitations that can occur in any setting but not necessarily in nature.

The core of Plotkin and colleagues' contribution is that cultivation of the undeveloped facets occurs in, by, and through wild nature when one enters with intent, longing, and innocence and that healing of the fragmented Self occurs through these newly developed or deepening facets of wholeness supporting and healing the subpersonalities. Four additional practices (voice dialogue, four-directions circles, dreamwork, and deep imagery) applicable to all facets and fragments that assist the process of Wholing and Self-healing are additionally offered in an appendix.

A coda precedes this appendix and serves as a summary of the maps as well as an invitation to move further, beyond Wholing and Self-healing and into "the process of Soul Initiation so that they can discover for themselves what it is Mystery or the Dreamtime or the Soul of the World intends for their lives" (p. 246).

Analysis

In total, *Wild Mind* completes what is hinted at by the book's title and introduction. But it also goes much more beyond that call. In

Wild Mind Plotkin not only provides a description of the inner ecology of the Self and a unique topography of the ego, he also challenges current domestic, academic, and brain Maps of the Self that pervade our culture and the academy and provides a herald call to the urgency of the time and the tasks ahead for us as individuals and our culture. Plotkin declares that this book is a "first presentation of the map, a work in progress" (p. 282), and the footnote describes that it is primarily for general readers and that professionals should refer to the Web site or enroll in an experiential training program that would include "additional distinctions, concepts, theory, therapeutic methods, case studies, references, and comparisons with other models" (p. 282). We should all look forward to those contributions as well as a training program.

Let us move now to what is lacking. First, as of this review, little material for professionals exists on the Web site. Next, publisher's discretion after publishing Plotkin's encyclopedic *Nature and the Human Soul* (2007) may have won out over further deepening this volume. My suspicion is that many general readers, especially those who have read Plotkin's *Soulcraft* (2003), which is populated with numerous numinous encounters by participants in his programs as well as by Plotkin himself and fellow guides, may come away overwhelmed by the theories, directions, archetypes, and relationships. In my mind, the strongest chapters for the general reader are Chapters 8 and 9, where Plotkin includes his work with his shadow selves (Chapter 8) and a participant's work with her escapist and addicts (Chapter 9) to describe the gifts held by the subpersonalities. I suspect the general reader will long for more vignettes of those who accepted these "invitations" or perhaps a longer narrative of one individual who participated in each of the Wholeness and Self-healing practices over time. Also, one wonders if the facets of wholeness chapters (2-5) could have been crafted differently by opening with an invitation to wander and, once completed, then an invitation to read further about the description of the facet. In the coda, Plotkin writes "I didn't write it to be merely read but to be engaged and applied in the cultivation of your own wild mind" (p. 247). I am curious if the general or academic reader would be more likely to wander if invited at the beginning of each chapter rather than near the end of each chapter. If the experience has salience, the reader would then go back to the guide, read further, and then embark on another invitation. This orientation mirrors our original use of field guides, which are not likely to be read first but rather after a hike where we might encounter a flower. "Look at this purple one. It's magnificent and looks like a larkspur, but do they have those here? Or is it a fringe or gentian? Perhaps it is such and such. Let's pull out the guide." In a general culture that consumes books, television, and the Internet but matures little, and an academic culture that rarely leaves the computer screen

or tower, I wonder, “Will readers be motivated to wander?” The subpersonality chapters, however, clearly require having completed the wholeness practices and reading the entire “sub” chapter before venturing further into healing from the 3-D Self.

Another criticism of this book is its absolute dismissal of mainstream psychological and psychiatric science and practice. Now, let me first qualify that I am a former academic psychiatrist who stepped away from academic psychiatry because I felt its philosophy of what it is to be human both limited and limiting, its practice dominated by “busy”-ness and business, and the entire academic medical culture to have a stranglehold on my own wholeness and depth. In spite of this bias, if the claim is made that the volume is for the general reader, my suspicion is that many individuals may quickly turn away from the text without accepting an invitation to cultivate wholeness. A significant minority of the population have encounters with primary care physicians, therapists, and psychiatrists and may have mental health disorders that, in fact, required or perhaps continue to require ongoing psychotropic medication. I would suspect that these readers, although possibly or probably ambivalent about their “diagnosis” and “medication,” may be put off by the dismissing tone of Plotkin’s words, especially in light of the fact that no hard data, case reports, or anecdotes are provided. It may very well be that following the suggestions for cultivating wholeness may be a better approach than treating symptoms, especially early on, but to state it is so without showing so is difficult to accept. I also suspect my former colleagues would quickly put the book back on the shelf before allowing Plotkin’s words to work on them and before an invitation is offered.

Acknowledging a third circle, perhaps a “shattered” self, is in order to signify that there are indeed times when even the subpersonalities fail to protect us, or others might need protection from our subpersonalities. These are the unfortunate occasions when many individuals need traditional therapies, psychiatric medication, hospitalization, or incarceration. These shattered selves are unlikely to benefit from these invitations to Wholing or Self-healing; however, once stabilized, these eco-walks to cultivate wholeness would be a wonderful avenue to move forward and, perhaps, dispel the need for medication or for “therapist dependency,” especially for individuals with symptoms of anxiety and depression. This description would also be in line with findings from recent meta-analyses that antidepressant medication is much better than psychotherapy for severe depression, relatively equivalent for moderate depression, and no better than placebo for mild depression (Fournier et al., 2010). My suspicion is that these invitations to Wholing and Self-healing are the antidote for those symptoms that fall in the mild category.

If we are to shift the consciousness of the culture and our colleagues in the more mainstream mental health disciplines, we need to be discerning when looking romantically back or forward in time. In spite of these minor criticisms, I found the volume invaluable professionally, philosophically, and personally.

Ensouling This Book Review

Let me unpack that last statement. In lieu of the author providing a narrative to his or a participant’s experience with these wholeness invitations, I will ask the readership’s permission to share my own experience with the walks as well as my own experience guiding individuals in my community with these suggested offerings. Only by using them as a field guide can one comment on the appropriateness of this map, legend, and invitations for this territory. Otherwise, we run the risk of learning a possibly self-coherent field of study without truly understanding it, or of that field being of any reality (i.e., reading a chemistry text but skipping the laboratory that physically demonstrates its models and equations, or, even worse, equating spiritual transformation with the study of systematic Christian theology!).

First, a very brief bit about myself. I am a middle-aged physician who left an academic position and endowed chair to move deeper into my own wandering and to serve the greater human and more-than-human community rather than my ego, my institution, and my first career. I moved to Nosara, Costa Rica, and am finishing my second year abroad.

I embarked on the South Facet (the terrain of broad and deep emotion, the terrain of one who is most at home in the earth) walks on a jungle trail near my residence. Rather than encountering what the tourist would hope for—quizzical pizotes, majestic morphos, scarlet macaws, loud howler monkeys, mysterious lizards, or venomous snakes—I encountered things that blocked “my path,” namely large web-creating spiders. Over the next 6 months, I engaged these spiders “in my path” in the exercise named Talking Across the Species Boundaries (p. 71). What evolved in my emotions was a progression in feeling, from shallow irritation and frustration and disdain for their webs to tolerance and curiosity, then a move toward surprise and delight at the craft of their weaving and sheer amazement at the speed at which one can cross its web and capture ensnared prey. As these direct experiences were occurring, there was a meta-awareness shift in consciousness as well as a web of tangled emotions that included grief, then love and awe and a sense of the holy, not of just this one put “in my path” but of all the beings in this dry tropical forest. The realization of how interaction with creatures, generally, and spiders, specifically, was modeled to me, and my new awakening to delight, awe, reverence, connectedness, and duty, led to

overwhelming grief at how I, my family, and my culture had been previously blocked in this awareness. I eventually named a particular spider Ishmael as I came to appreciate the beauty of the individual, species, genus, family, order, and class because these encounters and my vulnerability and permeability to the spider's reality allowed the spider to become my teacher. By seeing this one fully and over time, I was able to see myself and my world more fully. Similar conscious-expanding experiences occurred with all the offerings in all the directions. In addition, I found the "welcoming home and reassigning of the loyal soldier" to also be quite powerful and liberating. My first effort at welcoming home the loyal soldier was actually a "dishonorable discharge" that led to the strengthening of those voices. I reread the invitation, imagined the voices, and was able to deeply fall in love with my "Secret Service" who had and would take "bullets to protect me." A ceremony of truly honoring and reassigning followed and allowed me to move deeper into my calling.

After my first year abroad, I began offering these walks as part of developing a "gifting community" to local residents. I have offered all four facet walks to 8–12 individuals, and my observation is that each time they are successful offerings, not in the sense that the individual experiences something numinous, as is possible in Plotkin's Soulcraft practices, but that each individual comes away with a different sense of experiencing the world, ranging from enchantment to a remembrance of nature's pace and, primarily, a calling to look more deeply into nature. In addition, the skeptics, even the Eastern "quasi-nihilists" that commonly reside in this meditation and yoga destination are opened up a bit further to the enchantment and mystery of the natural world and the connection between the outer and the inner, not just in mind but in nature herself.

So, on two accounts, both as informative text and as useful field guide, I strongly endorse this book.

That leads us to what might be next in this line of work. Plotkin writes that these "techniques" have been used at Animas Valley Institute for some time in the wilderness guiding craft as well as in coaching and other settings. Perhaps it is time to publish a case series of individuals—and not just by Plotkin and the institute he founded. Perhaps college or graduate students pursuing a degree in ecopsychology could serve as subjects, and researchers could employ standardized measures of functioning in addition to subjective analysis. In all his works, Plotkin, as well as many of the founders and proponents of ecopsychology, proposes that it is time to radicalize psychology and to bring "clinical work" from the four walls of the clinician's and academician's office and into the wild from which we evolved. To do so, and to enter into the largest "objective" conver-

sation and the arena of the evidenced-based, these steps are necessary. Otherwise, this field will continue to be seen by the mainstream as "woo-woo" and lumped in with "fringe" or "quackery" elements of the complementary and alternative approaches, hindering widespread dissemination. Even academic clinicians and clinical researchers who have come around to accepting mindfulness as a role in clinical psychology and psychiatry continue to balk at depth psychology and ecopsychology practice as "far too subjective, intangible, and vague" (anonymous, personal communication). In addition, it could be that complementary and alternative approaches would be an appropriate clinical research setting and funding arena. Possible options include the comparison of a traditional psychotherapy, or even pharmacotherapy, for mild or mild-to-moderate depression or anxiety and to that traditional treatment with an additional component of Wholing practices. Perhaps a direct comparison is in order. Another next step for this work is for it to enter into the general educational curriculum—just as yoga and mindfulness practices are—of both mainstream and progressive (Expeditionary Learning, Outward Bound) schooling as well as into progressive spiritual communities. A last suggestion, offered humbly, but boldly, to this community of which I am a very recent convert, is for readers and contributors of this journal to read this field guide, accept the invitations for Wholing walks, as well as the Self-healing walks from Wholeness, and then to enter into one of the advanced offerings of a four-directions dialogue with the question, "What is the future of ecopsychology?" Perhaps this practice and subsequent sharing can lead to the most Whole progression of our own Selves, this primary Question, and this broad Community.

In summary, *Wild Mind* continues the evolutionary vein of the field of ecopsychology and Plotkin's contributions. His previous writings are directed toward the 10% of individuals that enter into the underworld journey. This field guide is for all individuals and offers maps, descriptions, and nature-based invitations to become more Whole and to Self-heal in an approach that is certainly counter to what would be offered by mainstream institutions, especially traditional and academic mental health. All adult readers can benefit from this new understanding offered in this readable, pragmatic, inviting, and at times entertaining, if not definitive, guide.

REFERENCES

- Animas Valley Institute. (2013). *Mission statement*. Durango, CO: Animas Valley Institute. Retrieved February 1, 2014, from <http://www.animas.org/about-us/our-organization/mission-statement>

- Buzzell, L., & Chalquist, C. (2009). *Ecotherapy: Healing with nature in mind*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.
- Fisher, A. (2013). *Radical ecopsychology: Psychology in the service of life*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Foster, S., & Little, M. (1999). *The four shields: The initiatory seasons of human nature*. Big Pine, CA: Lost Borders Press.
- Fournier, J. C., DeRubeis, R. J., Hollon, S. D., Dimidjian, S., Amsterdam, J. D., Shelton, R. C., & Fawcett, J. (2010). Antidepressant drug effects and depression severity: A patient-level meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 303, 47–53.
- Hostetter, K. (2004). *Adventure journal: With outdoor tips and advice*. Seattle, WA: Mountaineer Books.
- Plotkin, B. (2003). *Soulcraft: Crossing into the mysteries of nature and psyche*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Plotkin, B. (2007). *Nature and the human soul: Cultivating wholeness and community in a fragmented world*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Plotkin, B. (2013). *Wild mind: A field guide to the human psyche*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

Address correspondence to:
Brian Stafford, MD, MPH
Wilderness Is Medicine
C/O Brian Stafford
PO BOX 1478
Golden, CO 80402

E-mail: stafford.brianscot@icloud.com

Received: February 21, 2014
Accepted: March 20, 2014