

Mapping The Psyche Between Self And Soil: A Review Of Bill Plotkin's "Wild Mind," By Carolyn Baker

As a former psychotherapist and as a student of eco-psychology, I was thrilled to learn of Bill Plotkin's work several years ago if for no other reason that that he describes himself as a "psychologist gone wild." Within today's dismal mental health scene dominated by the pharmaceutical industry and the not-so-hidden agenda of producing malleable consumers who blend compliantly into the milieu of empire, Plotkin's work resuscitates the mental health landscape with notions of vibrant humanity and unprecedented aliveness.

In *Nature And The Human Soul*, Plotkin provides an in-depth study of the developmental stages through which humans pass and teaches us how to reclaim our wholeness and vitality in each one, using every stage as a template for human maturation and mystical affiliation with the universe. But perhaps the word "study" does not even begin to approach the profundity of what Plotkin has given us in *Nature And The Human Soul*, for as a friend of mine once said, "When I allow my eyes to fall on any page of that book, I can end up being there for three days."

Taking that stunning 2008 book to the next level, Plotkin now gives us *Wild Mind: A Field Guide To The Human Psyche* where beyond traversing a series of developmental stages, we navigate a map that guides us into the vast territory of forging of our own individual wholeness and onward toward the creation of healthy cultures and families. We're being asked now to embark not simply on the individual journey of wholeness, but on a species journey toward a new quality of humanity and collective consciousness transformation.

Throughout his work Plotkin incessantly juxtaposes *ego*-psychology and *eco*-psychology, insisting that the principal task before humanity is to move from a psychology that hermetically seals itself off from the ecosystems and the sacred in order to advance the ego's agenda, into a psychology that recognizes the deeper Self within and around us. Without intimate and undomesticated connection with mountains, rivers, forests, animals, oceans, insects, and rocks, we cannot become whole beings who also become larger than their historical personal wounding.

Occasionally in spiritual circles people boast of having eliminated the ego. Neither Plotkin or I would agree that this is desirable, let alone possible. We need the ego for functioning practically in the world. The ego allows us to drive a car, balance a checkbook, and take out the garbage. Our challenge is not the ego itself but an ego disconnected from the earth community and from the sacred. For Plotkin, the ultimate purpose of spiritual and psychological healing is not to eliminate the human ego but to create what he calls a "3-D Ego" which engages

in deep communion with nature and with the deeper Self. “When anchored in our 3-D Egos, we understand ourselves as agents or handmaidens for the Soul...Soul holds the knowledge of what we individually were born to do and to be. The Ego, on the other hand, knows how to get things done, to make things happen, but it doesn’t know from its own experience what to offer its life to.”

While Plotkin does attend to the intricacies of personal wounding in *Wild Mind*, he does so in relation to the natural world and the sacred, revealing them as healing and integrating agents that supersede symptoms and restore wholeness. Much of the book’s language employs concepts of traditional psychology but consistently joins them with spiritual and ecological imperatives. The baby is not thrown out with the bathwater in an attempt to reject Western psychological principles but rather wrapped in a more expansive, cosmological vision.

Early on he gives us the three core messages of the book:

- The key to healing and growing whole is not to be found in suppressing symptoms but in cultivating wholeness.
- Cultivating personal wholeness and building life-enhancing cultures are inextricably connected.
- The three imperatives of any healthy, mature culture are: Protecting and nurturing the vitality and diversity of its environment; providing adequate numbers of true adults and elders; protecting and fostering the wholeness of the sacred in each person.

Wild Mind uses terms such as Self, Soul, and Spirit which Plotkin defines near the beginning of the book, but rather than attempting to define those in this review, I prefer to simply use “the sacred” as an inclusive term that applies to all of the other three. Plotkin offers what we rarely find in the literature of traditional psychology or on the shelves of the self-help sections of bookstores, namely, a view of our personal wounding through the lens of the sacred and the earth community, utilizing those to integrate a broken psyche with the deeper Self.

Employing the four directions of Native American and other indigenous cultures, *Wild Mind* maps both our intra-personal and inter-personal relationship with the Self. For example:

- North: The facet of the Self is the Nurturing Generative Adult , whereas a wounded north can take the form of an inner critic, codependent, or immature pseudo-warrior.
- South: The south facet is the Wild Indigenous One, the sensuous, emotive, erotic, and instinctive aspect of ourselves, while a wounded south might be a wounded child, victim, conformist, or rebel.
- East: The east facet of the Self is the Innocent/Sage (or Trickster or Sacred Fool), while a wounded east can manifest as an addict or an escapist.

- West: The west facet of the Self is the Muse, Inner Beloved, or Guide to Soul, whereas the wounded west takes the form of the Shadow or a variety of Shadow selves such as an addict or a counterfeit guru.

Each direction also has its sub-personalities which are the self-defeating or self-destructive patterns we adopted in childhood in order to survive and protect ourselves. As we work with each of the four directions within the psyche, we do not attempt to eliminate the sub-personalities but rather utilize them to cultivate wholeness and discover their gifts.

According to Plotkin:

We're born with the capacity to embody each of these four sets of psychological resources, but we must consciously cultivate them in order to have ready access. Mainstream Western culture ignores or suppresses all four facets because the embodied Self is incompatible with egocentric ways of life. This renders human development much more challenging in the contemporary West than it is in healthier cultures.

As with all of Plotkin's books, when picking up *Wild Mind*, one must be willing to embark on the elaborate excursion that his work inherently requires. This is not a book to be hurriedly completed in order to move on to the next nugget of wisdom. Rather, like *Nature and The Human Soul* and *Soulcraft*, *Wild Mind* provides a succulent banquet of truths that resonate with body and soul---an internal GPS that connects the deeper, sacred Self with the soil from which we evolved and instructs us throughout the journey of becoming a radically new human species.

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