

# When Watching A Sunset Can Help A Relationship Dawn Anew: Nature-Guided Therapy For Couples And Families

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*Based on the case of a couple in conflict who were available for only two sessions of therapy, this article explores the application of a brief, integrative ecopsychology, **Nature-Guided Therapy**, in relationship work. It discusses what nature-guided therapy is, where it fits in the spectrum of therapeutic interventions, and how it can be applied. As there is a paucity of literature linking the growing field of ecotherapy with family and couple therapy, the relevance of nature-guided approaches is discussed. Its goal goes beyond problem resolution, aiming at the creation of positive, effective and joyful relationships. Step-by-step procedures for applying nature-guided interventions in family and couple work are presented.*

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Watching a sunset, courting under a full moon, strolling hand in hand along the seashore or picnicking together in a park: these are experiential contexts in which couples create and build relationships. Camping in the forest, week-ending by the beach, or holidaying in a scenic spot are experiences that can both sustain and enhance the quality of couple and family relationships. Nature-guided therapy seeks to create those positive experiential contexts for the development and maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships.

## The Case Of Belinda And Malcolm

The romance of a sunset had been so important in Belinda and Malcolm's courtship that they planned a holiday in which they hoped to capture many more. For the ten years they had been together, they had shared a mutual dream of purchasing a caravan and driving around the continent. One would expect the realisation of such a long held fantasy to be a time of relaxation and pleasure. Unfortunately that was not proving to be the case.

They were both in their late forties. For each it was a second marriage. Despite the extensive pre-holiday planning they had put in, they met an obstacle they had not been anticipating. As they towed the caravan around the highways and by-ways of the country, so they dragged their problems from home along with them. Whether camped by a beach or in a rain forest they found conversation drifting back to the issues they had wanted to

leave behind. Instead of being enraptured by the passing scenery they regurgitated stressful memories half a continent away.

Belinda began to develop anxiety, muscular tension and agitation. She said it felt as though her head 'was about to explode'. Blood pressure symptoms, which had been medically controlled for several years, began to re-emerge. When they arrived in Perth she consulted a general practitioner.

Not knowing how to manage his wife's symptoms, and frustrated that what should have been a joyful experience was not going to plan, Malcolm became irritable and verbally aggressive. For years he had grappled with a violent temper. It had led to the break-up of his first marriage and caused rocky periods early in this current marriage. Thinking that he had won the battle, he now found it difficult to face the fact that this old enemy was once more rearing its ugly head.

The general practitioner Belinda consulted astutely detected the problems and referred them for psychotherapy. This provided a challenge. They were required to return home by a certain date, and to meet their planned schedule only had time to attend me for two appointments.

Which, of all the possible therapeutic tools I might employ, was likely to be most beneficial? I could explore the complexities of the family systems described below. I could adopt a cognitive-behavioural approach of assessing what cognitions influenced what behaviours, and what strategies might be employed for change. I could engage them in the interpersonal schema approach for brief couples therapy described by Gilbert and Shmukler (1996), or, indeed, unravel any of the strands of couple dynamics analysed by Crawley (1998). Despite the advantages that each of these approaches offered, they had two drawbacks. First, most were primarily oriented to

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symptom resolution and, second, all required time that my clients did not have available.

An ordeal technique to modify the undesired behaviours of engaging in stressful conversations (Haley, 1984; Burns, 1997) may have helped solve the time problem, but again I considered it would be more helpful to *create* effective, positive, relational behaviours rather than just *eliminate* the undesired. I could have chosen a solution-focused approach (de Shazer, 1985; O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis, 1989) but nature-guided therapy is grounded in brief, solution-focused and integrative techniques, and was thus likely to provide whatever these approaches could—and even more. Nature-guided therapy therefore became my choice.

### What Is Nature-Guided Therapy?

Nature-guided therapy (Burns, 1998, 1999a, 1999b) is a brief integrative therapeutic approach that falls under the umbrella of ecopsychology (Roszak, Gomes and Kanner, 1995) which is a relative newcomer in the field of psychological disciplines. At its core, ecopsychology attempts to understand human nature in the broader context of our relationship with the ecology.

What O'Hanlon (1994) refers to as the 'first wave' of psychotherapy drew its inspiration from the pathology focused theories that began with Freud. These explored the inner workings of the psyche, to the neglect of a person's immediate relationships, family systems, social or cultural milieux and broader aspects of the person–nature ecology. Freud very actively steered psychology away from the outer world as he focused on the psyche within. Speaking of the broader ecology he said, 'Nature is eternally remote. She destroys us—coldly, cruelly and relentlessly' (cited in Roszak, 1992: 22). The result of this, concludes Roszak, was 'A psychotherapy that separated us from the planet' (1992: 44).

During what O'Hanlon describes as the 'second wave', psychotherapy shifted from a pathology-based perspective to one that was problem focused. It began to explore outside the psyche, examining environmental stimuli, family relationships and social contexts. Ecotherapy probably fits within O'Hanlon's definition of a 'third wave' approach in that it is a therapy that is more competence and solution-based. In this approach, change is seen as a constant occurrence and a person's relationship with the broad context of his/her existence may be highly relevant to his/her psychosocial functioning. Simply put, the theory behind ecopsychology is that through our evolution we have developed a 'biological fit' with nature and the way we acknowledge and employ this fit is a crucial factor in our wellbeing—both biologically and psychologically.

A growing body of research, particularly in the area of environmental psychology, has demonstrated the therapeutic benefits of nature contact. It can reduce levels of stress (Baum, Singer and Baum, 1982; Ulrich and Simmons, 1986), enhance states of positive affect (Russell and Mehrabian, 1976), and improve parasympathetic nervous system functioning (Ulrich, Dimberg and Driver, 1991). Being in contact with nature increases physical health (Rietman and Pokorny, 1974; Wright, 1983), promotes

more health-oriented behaviours (Russell and Mehrabian, 1976), and reduces the length of time patients stay in hospital (Jerstad and Stelzer, 1973; Lowry, 1974; Ulrich, 1984). If you want to enhance your client's self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence (Wright, 1983), facilitate treatment of the mentally ill (Levitt, 1991), or improve family relationships (Mulholland and Williams, 1998) then the research is clear: employing nature contact in your therapeutic program is a potent therapeutic intervention. Nature-guided therapy is about applying these demonstrated benefits to therapeutic practice, in ways that will most enhance the achievement of the client's therapeutic goal.

### The History of the Couple's Problems

In our first session Belinda spontaneously launched into describing feelings of guilt which she attributed to a critical and down-putting mother. She felt guilty about the break-up of her first marriage, despite the abusive and denigratory way her first husband had treated her and continued to treat her even after they were divorced. She felt guilty that her son had become a drug addict, and that her daughter had not spoken with her for the last two years after accusing Belinda of sexually abusing her. She even felt guilt about taking her holiday, as it meant leaving behind her bachelor brother who suffered with both alcoholism and epilepsy.

Malcolm, too, had a past that haunted him and Belinda. His three children had totally rejected him for more than a decade because of his violent temper outbursts during his first marriage, because he was seen as the cause of their parents' separation, and because he had (in their eyes) too quickly entered into a relationship with another woman, namely Belinda.

He had worked on the family farm all his life, while his brother had forsaken it for the bright lights of the city. When the father suddenly died the brother returned, like the Prodigal Son, to claim his inheritance. Malcolm felt cheated, and bitter sibling rivalry had developed.

These were the issues that continued to plague their conversations as they cruised panoramic coastlines or sat dining under the stars. Though the holiday had been planned, at least in part, as an escape or respite from their problems, it wasn't working. What could nature-guided therapy offer to help resolve this current dilemma and better equip them to manage these situations on their return home?

### The Relevance of Nature-Guided Approaches to Family and Couple Therapy

Gregory Bateson, whose work has been seen as a cornerstone of the family therapy movement, has spoken forcefully of the unifying bond between biosphere and humanity. In *Mind And Nature* he laments that this bond has been severed and that humanity is experiencing a loss of what he described as 'the pattern which connects'. For Bateson there was a 'glue' that held together all elements of the biosphere, 'the star-fishes and sea anemones and red-wood forests and human committees' (1980: 4). He claimed that,

for him, mind was 'a reflection of large parts and many parts of the natural world outside the thinker' (1980: 5).

For Bateson it was clear that we do not exist solely as independent or autonomous individuals, nor do we exist simply in terms of our interrelationship with systems such as the family. Our very existence, as well as our wellbeing, he saw as one of an intimate ecological relationship: 'I surrender to the belief that my knowing is a small part of a wider integrated knowing that meets the entire biosphere of creation' (1980: 98).

A second aspect of the relationship between nature-guided and family therapies is seen in the work and writings of such people as Jay Haley and Milton Erickson. Haley, in his book *Ordeal Therapy* (1984), included a chapter under the heading, *Using The Great Outdoors*. Erickson used nature contact in his own recovery from polio (Haley and Richeport, 1993) and, perhaps as a result of this experience, frequently prescribed assignments that involved clients in interactions with nature, such as climbing the local mountain, Squaw Peak (Zeig, 1980). He sent them on treks into the desert (Rosen, 1982), had them sit on a lawn observing nature (Rosen, 1982) or directed depressed men to dig a garden and plant flowers for someone else (Zeig, 1980).

Family therapy has been selective in what it has taken from these fathers of the movement. Unfortunately, nature-based therapeutic approaches do not seem to have made inroads into assisting those with family problems. Mulholland and Williams (1998), like myself, have lamented that they could find few reports of ecotherapy, wilderness therapy or adventure therapy being employed in family areas. As they rightly point out, this doesn't mean that such interventions are not being employed but rather that they go unreported.

A third overlap between family therapy and nature-guided approaches lies in the premise that one effective way of bringing about change is to alter the larger system that exists around the individual (Berg, 1994). While nature-guided therapy sees the person as being a part of the larger system (indeed, a system much larger than family structures and other interpersonal relationships) it is not about *changing* that system as much as it is about *employing* those effective therapeutic elements of the ecology for the attainment of a client's therapeutic goal.

Fourth, in common with family therapy approaches, ecotherapy acknowledges that behaviour relates to and emerges from the context in which it is expressed. Whilst there is this common ground, family therapy has more traditionally focused on how the interactions within the family system can trigger and maintain ongoing problematic patterns. Nature guided therapy is more focused on what factors in the human-nature interaction can be employed to reach the therapeutic goal.

Finally, 'third wave' approaches in family therapy that have been based in solution and competence seek to engage clients more in their strengths than their weaknesses. Similarly the therapeutic goal in nature-guided therapy is one of empowerment and attainment of the desired states of wellbeing. This is summed up well in the words of Walters and Havens:

... when the desired outcome is health, the initiation of healthy attitudes and behaviours may be more beneficial than attempts to uncover and cure illness. When the goal is joy, it would be wise to ignore existing sadness and shift attention towards joyful ideas, activities and events. As a rule, people will be happier, healthier, and more competent if they do things that are associated with happiness, health, and competence, rather than trying *not* to do things that are associated with unhappiness, illness, failure (1993: 10).

It is on the basis of this that the family 'issues' described by Belinda and Malcolm were not the focus of therapeutic attention. Rather, attention was directed towards the creation of enjoyment, positive interpersonal interactions and strategies that might help facilitate the enjoyment of the remainder of their holiday, and indeed the remainder of their lives.

## Creating The Therapeutic Goal

One thing I noticed during their consultation was that Belinda and Malcolm shared a genuinely warm and affectionate relationship. Their conversation expressed mutual caring. If one became at all distressed the other reached over with tactile reassurance, and, like professional dancers, there was an intimate synchronicity in the way they quickly tapped into each other's humour. What could I offer in just two consultations that would be meaningful and helpful in the management of their problems? And how could the closeness, intimacy and affection they expressed towards each other be employed as a resource in the attainment of their goal?

Their conversations had been going round in endless circles because the issues were insoluble: unchangeable aspects of the past, factors over which they had little control, or matters which involved other people who were very distant from them and my consulting room. Their valuable holiday time was being wasted. To assist them to create more time for positive experiences and spend less on the insoluble problems, they were asked, independently of each other, to complete the Sensual Awareness Inventory (SAI) (Burns, 1998). The completed inventories, which are reproduced here, show the usual preponderance of nature-based experiences. On each, under the Sight heading, they included sunsets. It was pleasing to note that, despite their family histories of poor relationship models, ten years of marriage had not devalued the priority which they afforded each other on the Inventory. The SAI became the basis for therapeutic interventions designed to enhance the positive experiences of their travel and relationship whilst reducing the focus of attention on their problems.

For both Belinda and Malcolm, the process of completing the SAI offered enjoyment, confirmation of their feelings for each other, and some empowerment. For families caught in a cycle of conflict it often comes as a relief that their initial therapeutic contact does not become embroiled in unresolved issues but directs them towards individual and interactional experiences of enjoyment. With the emphasis on pleasure and improved relationships, questions of motivation, resistance or compliance are rarely encountered in administering the SAI.

## Belinda's Sensual Awareness Inventory

Under each heading please list 10–20 items or activities from which you get pleasure, enjoyment or comfort.

SIGHT	SOUND	SMELL	TASTE	TOUCH	ACTIVITY
Malcolm	Malcolm laughing	Hay	Roast meal	Lambswool covers	Fishing
Baby animals	A bird in a National Park	Leather	Cooked onions	Malcolm	Holidaying
Sunsets		Fresh mown lawn	Aniseed	Malcolm's face after a shave	Walking
Waves at beach	Magpies	Horses	Salmon		Oil painting
Reflections on water	Water trickling in a stream	Roast meat	Caramel milkshakes	Baby ducks	Walking in rain
		Onions cooking	Chinese food	Day-old chickens	Talking to Malcolm
City lights over water	Water lapping	Carnations	Chicken	Horse's noses	Barbecue with friends
	Breeze in trees	Babies after a bath	Garlic bread	A shower	
Baby ducks	Thunder	Lemon scented gum trees	Peanuts	Warm shower after being caught in the rain	Knitting
A painting after I've finished it (a good one)	Kids giggling	Fish cooking	Casseroles		Gardening
	Sprinklers in caravan park	Malcolm	Savoury foods		Xmas
Xmas lights		Pipe tobacco	Iced coffee	Waterbed	Massage from Malcolm
Kids playing	Rain on roof	Fresh sawdust	Prawns		Lying talking in front of heater in winter
Sleeping babies	Crows	Rain	Crabs		Cuddling Malcolm
Shetland ponies	Steam train	Wood fire			Buying things for other people— not just Xmas presents
Red roses		Eucalyptus leaves			Cold showers in summer
		Prawns cooking		Clean sheets	Prawning

## Malcolm's Sensual Awareness Inventory

Under each heading please list 10–20 items or activities from which you get pleasure, enjoyment or comfort.

SIGHT	SOUND	SMELL	TASTE	TOUCH	ACTIVITY
Belinda	Belinda	Belinda	Belinda	Belinda	Belinda
Ocean on calm day	Birds in a National Park	Newly sawn timber	Grapes	Patting Rottweiler	Walking
		Newly turned soil	Watermelon	Patting cats	Talking
A river with trees overhanging it	Bell birds	Water on dry soil	Choc coated ice-creams	Patting horses	Walking barefoot in the rain
Gorges	Waves breaking	Mown lawns	Rockmelon	Belinda's hair etc.	Gardening
Great Ocean Road	Water on side of a boat	Baked dinner	Mango		Mowing
Ferns in bush	Steam trains	Onion cooking	Leg of Lamb		Giving Belinda a massage
Mist after a storm		Leather	Chicken		Fishing in an aluminium boat
City lights	Outboard motors	Hay	T-bone		
Waterfalls		Rain forests	Lamb chops		Looking at our country
Sunrises	Music	Lemon scented gum trees	Prawns		Fishing
Sunsets	Silence	Babies' hair after their bath	Peaches		Prawning
			Peanuts		

### Using The Sensual Awareness Inventory

Once their individual SAIs had been completed between the first and second consultations, the clients were directed in ways of employing the inventories for their continuing well-being. Some examples of how this might be done are listed below.

#### 1 Pleasuring oneself

If a client has listed between ten and twenty items that provide pleasure, enjoyment or comfort under each of the headings on the Sensual Awareness Inventory this means that he or she has a ready resource of some sixty to one hundred and twenty potential experiences for changing thoughts, feelings and behaviour. From this extensive and comprehensive list, a client can be directed to alter unwanted thoughts or experiences into more pleasurable states.

For example, if Belinda found she was beginning to become stressed or anxious then she might employ items on the Sensual Awareness Inventory that helped her feel

more relaxed. She might want to pause, where possible, to watch reflections in still water, listen to the sounds of a babbling stream, or enjoy the fragrance of eucalypt trees. If Malcolm found his irritability was rising, he was directed to seek an item on the Sensual Awareness Inventory that he could employ at that time to create a more pleasurable state of affect. His inventory suggests this might be the sound of breaking waves, the smell of a fresh mown lawn, or the tactile experience of patting an animal.

#### 2 Pleasuring the other

As well as pleasuring oneself the Sensual Awareness Inventory can be used to help pleasure one's partner. Malcolm and Belinda were asked to put their Sensual Awareness Inventories in a prominent place that would be visible for both themselves and their partner. They decided to stick them to the wardrobe door in their caravan. From this they were able to help their partner change a state of unwanted affect by creating an experience that was more pleasurable and enjoyable.

If Belinda wanted to do something caring for Malcolm she might invite him to walk barefoot in the rain with her, sit together watching a sunset over the ocean on a calm day, or find a waterfall where they could recline on a rock in silence. If Malcolm wanted to pleasure Belinda he might choose to cook her a meal of prawns, serving it up on a table adorned with carnations. He might want to sit with her on the beach and share a sunset together, or listen to the sounds of birds in a national park.

### 3 Pleasuring each other

As planning for the future of a relationship is a process that involves both bonding and direction, the clients were asked to ensure that each night for the remainder of their journey they used their Sensual Awareness Inventories to plan a mutual activity for the following day. Asking Malcolm and Belinda to perform this planning task at a time when they previously would have engaged in conversations that led to feelings of anger and frustration was likely to break the old pattern through the creation of more pleasurable processes. Bonding in a relationship can be obtained from the process of discussion, planning and anticipation of such events regardless of whether they are enacted. Nonetheless it was insisted that they ensure that the planned activity was carried out.

As each of them had listed sunsets as a pleasurable sight, I enquired how they might be able to share the joy of this experience. 'We do already', replied Malcolm. 'We always ensure we arrive in camp in sufficient time to set up for the night and watch the sunset. The problem is, it's often spoilt by our conversation drifting back to all the old issues'. I asked how they might focus on the experience of the moment instead. Belinda suggested a ban on unwanted subjects, adding that they should remind each other if one unconsciously started to slip back into it.

'I see what you're getting at', commented Malcolm. 'If we attend to something we enjoy, like watching a sunset, something new might dawn on us.'

### 4 Remembering past, mutual, nature-based pleasures.

Malcolm and Belinda were given a mind game to play either as they drove along in their car or over a meal at the end of the day. They were to ask each other what were the most pleasurable experiences they could recall having had together, particularly in the natural environment. This was designed to heighten their awareness of the pleasurable experiences that brought them together in the first place and shift their attention away from stressful issues that could not be modified.

### 5 Questions for extending mutual pleasure

Belinda and Malcolm were provided with a list of questions to ask each other after the completion of the above activities. These were:

- What did we gain from that experience?
- How do we think we could benefit from doing more of that sort of thing?
- How can we do something similar, or different, for fun again?

When is it going to be convenient to re-create such an experience?

In exploring each of these questions they were directed to:

- 1 Discuss their own feelings and experiences.
- 2 Listen carefully to the feelings expressed by their partner.
- 3 Search for the mutually pleasurable experiences, rather than the difficulties or problems.

## Conclusions

Contos (1998) refers to an important, and, I think, obligatory question for couple therapy: Why were you drawn to each other? In listening to the replies to this enquiry it is helpful to pay attention, not just to the relational aspects of the answers, but also to the contextual factors. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the contexts in which many couples develop their relationships are often closely associated with nature: strolling hand in hand along the beach, picnicking by a stream, or parking in a romantic spot under a full moon. These are the contexts for romance and love. The unfortunate thing is that many couples lose the awareness of those contextual factors. Caught up in the day-to-day management of the household, the commitments of work, the rearing of children, and the concerns of balancing the budget, romance tends to lose priority. The stimulating, rejuvenating elements of interacting with the natural environment tend to be lost. As well as being conducive to the *creation* of positive relationship experiences, such experiences are also essential for the *maintenance* of continuing healthy relationships.

This is not an outcome study. Belinda and Malcolm were seen for just two consultations before resuming their journey around the continent, and the case was not followed up. Their story is used more as an example of how nature-guided therapy can be employed for brief and integrative therapeutic interventions with families and couples. I do not want to herald this approach as the only, or even the best, therapeutic intervention that might have been employed in this case, but I do wish to concur with Hillman and Ventura when they claim that if we are looking for a cure or resolution we need to look not at a therapeutic model but more at people in relation with their ecology. 'Getting in touch with your inner life and figuring out your family systems is, at best, no more than part of the job' (Hillman and Ventura, 1992: 54).

I present nature-guided therapy as one of the functional tools in the therapeutic tool kit. The more such tools we have the better we are able to meet the needs of each of our uniquely individual clients. If we confine ourselves in theory or techniques, and miss the therapeutic potency of a client's milieu, we limit their potential gains. Admittedly relationships are complex. To manage them effectively all participants need to master a range of skills, including problem solving, conflict resolution, effective communication, expression and acceptance of intimacy, as well as the affirmation of each other. Important on this list of skills is also the ability to have fun together, to share times of joy, and to create mutual happiness.

Bringing beauty and sensuousness into life makes it rewarding, happy and healthy, and may facilitate feelings of love. Love, according to Hillman is about beauty, aesthetics and sensuousness—‘a kind of joy’ (Hillman and Ventura, 1992: 47).

‘Love’, says Hillman,

doesn’t result from working at something. So the therapeutic approach to love, of clearing up the relationship, may clear up communication disorders, expression inhibitions, insensitive habits, may even improve sex, but I don’t think it releases love (Hillman and Ventura, 1992: 47).

The good news is that the natural resources for creating joyful, love-based, effective relationships are readily available. Clients do not need to journey around Australia. They do not have to purchase tickets for an exotic holiday. The items listed by clients on their Sensual Awareness Inventory may be readily available at a neighbourhood park, on a local beach, in their own back yard or through a kitchen window. The pleasure of walking beside a babbling stream may help cool the heat of anger by creating experiences of serenity. The soporific lap of waves on the seashore may help spontaneously wash away anxiety through the emergence of tranquillity. Depression can lift with the joy arising from listening to the song of a bird. And watching a sunset together may assist a relationship to dawn anew.

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