

What's the Malady?

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What is the human malady that bioregionalism is called to address?

Is it a biological malady?

Is it a cultural malady?

Is it a psychological/spirit malady?

I want to explore each of these three questions.

Is the malady that bioregionalism faces biological?

No, my view on this is unequivocal. There is nothing wrong with human biology any more than there is something wrong with giraffe biology. Biological evolution brought humanity into being as a culture-building animal. Culture-building is a role we are stuck with. In and of itself culture-building is wholly good. Malady enters the planetary drama when humans build cultures that are disconnected from general nature. This is a tricky subject because every culture is a human-made construct laid on top of "the world of born." There is, therefore, always some tension between the "world of made" and the "world of born." But that tension does not have to be one of tyranny over the world of born or contempt for the world of born in favor of some human ideal or some heavenly realm. A human culture can be transparent to nature and honoring of nature.

Is the malady that bioregionalism faces cultural?

Yes, is my answer, but we have to define "culture" carefully and say what we mean by a cultural problem.

What I mean by "culture" is any social process that is not an economic process or a political process. So "culture" includes a people's common sense, scientific knowledge, existential wisdom, useful skills, educational structures, media, languages, arts, religions, life styles, customary individual roles, modes of association, moralities, etc. etc. etc. According to this definition of culture, every society has a culture, just like every society has a polity and an economy. And it must be added that culture processes are inseparable related to political and economic processes. Culture, we might say, is the soft underbelly of that whole social reality which we now see hardened into economic processes that are destroying the planet.

The fact that current Western culture is massively disconnected from our biological nature and from our natural communities does not make it any less a culture. And it does not diminish our critique of this culture to say that this culture is very powerful culture with many valid elements in it. A wholesale dismissal of Western culture is not necessary in order to heal Western culture of its anthropocentrism. In fact some elements of Western culture, such as our scientific objectivity, may be crucial in making the overall transition we need to make.

Religion, too, is a resource as well as a problem. No one is more convinced than I that the established, popular forms of religion are vastly sick. Civilization's organized religions certainly tend to be human-centered and autistic to the glories and majesties of the natural world. But we would be mistaken to underestimate the potentialities within Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism--yes, and within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam as well as within Native American Religions,

many Pagan expressions, and other clearly nature-based traditions. Gary Snyder, a very prominent bioregionalist, might be viewed as a product of Buddhism. This is true of Joanna Macy and many others. Thomas Berry and others are the product of monastic Catholicism. Wes Jackson and I and many others are the product of prophetic Protestantism. David Haenke claims inspiration from Taoism. (Popular Taoism in many parts of the world is almost as corrupt as popular Christianity.) David Abram claims inspiration from the animistic and mystical heritages of Judaism. And on and on this goes. Some of the finest elements in Western culture have Jewish and Christian roots. Even those of us who vigorously rebel against the sick forms of these traditions often do so in terms of healthy elements we have learned from these same traditions.

But we do need to recognize that all our ancient scriptures are meaningless unless they are assisting us to see what we can see in the here and now of our actual experience. And in our actual here and now we would do well to listen to the trees and other natural avatars for the wisdom we need to live on this planet. At the same time, our cultural and religious heritages can assist us in our listening to nature. Our inherited traditions are not entirely poverty stricken with regard to biocentric sensitivities. Many of the biblical Psalms writers were clearly listening to the trees--learning from the whole of nature. The Buddha, Jesus, Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingham, and thousands of others all listened to the trees and to the other surrounding realities of nature.

Indeed, the Tao might be translated "THE WAY IT IS." or if you prefer "THE WAY IT MOVES." What we are less clear about is that, properly understood, the Buddhist Dharma, the Hindu Brahman, and the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic God are also names for THE WAY IT MOVES--for that BOUNDLESS MYSTERY that we meet in a tree and every other bit of natural reality. If this be true, then the healthy forms of all these religious heritages are biocentric. The fact that all of these religious heritages have colluded with the anthropocentric perversion is just one more example of how capable human beings are of corrupting what is natural and good about our cultural heritages and about being a human being.

Many secular Western writers are also supportive of the biocentric theme. Writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, and many others reflect the quest to build a culture that is transparent to nature. Poets like e. e. cummings are another indicator that Western culture contains helpful cultural resources. I have long loved this poem of his:

Pity this busy monster, manunkind,
not. Progress is a comfortable disease:
your victim (death and life safely beyond)

plays with the bigness of his littleness
--electrons deify one razorblade
into a mountainrange;lenses extend

unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish
returns on its unself.

A world of made
is not a world of born--pity poor flesh

and trees, poor stars and stones, but never this
fine specimen of hypermagical

ultraomnipotence. We doctors know

a hopeless case if--listen:there's a hell
of a good universe next door;let's go

Surely this poem is a witness that we need not claim that Western culture has no awareness of just how insane our human-centered exaggerations are. So let us not make transforming our culture sound any harder than it actually is. We have many allies who have been at work for many generations.

Still the calling to transform an intensely anthropocentric culture is an overwhelming challenge, but there is no good universe next door where we can go to escape doing this job. This brings me to my last question:

Is the malady that bioregionalism faces psychological/spiritual?

Yes, is my answer. We confront a deep inward malady when we try to explain why people cling to our anthropocentric cultures. It is not because their human biology is bad; it is because they want a different life than the one they have. They don't want to be a born and dying body that is part of nature. They want to be a hypermagical ultraomnipotence or to find a good universe next door. This is the psychological or spirit problem beneath our clinging to anthropocentric cultures. People don't want simple, genuine, essential, nature-connected human life. At the same time people are in despair because they are unwilling to be this natural life that they are. All these human-made artificial substitutes for nature-connected life are finally unsatisfying. This mounting dissatisfaction with anthropocentric artificiality is our hope for a bioregionally sane planet.

Bioregionalism does not have to invent a new species; it just has to assist people to be the natural species that they already are. And being human in a local natural region of this one planet is not in the least outlandish. Where else can we live except in some actual local place? Marriage to a local place and responsibility for that place is only outlandish to those who are captivated by perpetual mobility in an artificial world of monetary progress. This busy civilizational rat-race is one big illusion that we are going someplace better than where we are--to some good universe next door. This is an illusion because this rat-race actually leads to ecological doom. So instead of heading out for some good universe next door, LET'S NOT GO. That is the psychological/spirit issue: STAYING PUT IN OUR ACTUAL LIVES, YES, STAYING PUT IN OUR NATURAL REGIONS OF EARTH REALITY.

We should be able to explain this to a few billion people.