

Ecopsychology

RESTORING THE EARTH
HEALING THE MIND

Edited by

Theodore Roszak

Mary E. Gomes

Allen D. Kanner

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Forewords by Lester R. Brown and James Hillman

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The All-Consuming Self

ALLEN D. KANNER AND MARY E. GOMES

FREUD CALLED DREAMS the "royal road into the unconscious." In highly industrial society, consumption habits have taken on the dimensions of a vast fantasy life that now rivals the dream as a way of gaining insight into the irrational depths of everyday life. As these fantasies are elaborated through the mesmerizing power of the media and the advertising industry, they grow into a vast collective realm of projected desires, fears, and aspirations. For ecopsychologists, our behavior in the marketplace and the shopping mall represents a rich new field of diagnostic material. In this essay Allen Kanner and Mary Gomes analyze the powerful psychic forces and economic interests that underlie "the all-consuming self." Their conclusions are part of an ambitious ongoing analysis of the narcissistic foundations of the American psyche.

During the 1992 global environmental summit conference held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, representatives from several Third World countries approached President George Bush to ask him to consider reducing the consumption habits of the United States. They contended that a major cause of the current ecological crisis was the enormous demand for con-

sumer goods emanating from the United States and other industrialized nations. Moreover, it seemed unfair to them that they should be asked to manage their natural resources in a more sustainable manner—often to the detriment of the short-term interests of their economy—while relatively minor concessions were being asked of the richer industrialized nations.

Bush's reply was terse and to the point: "The American way of life is not up for negotiation." To Third World countries, Bush's intransigence was disappointing and discouraging. But the strongest reaction that rippled through the conference, and then around much of the world, was one of outrage at the arrogance behind this statement. What was so holy about the American way of life? How was the rest of the world to deal with such an unyielding position?

Within the United States, however, something quite different was happening. Although some protest was heard, by and large the media and the public were quiet. Bush had struck a nerve. Americans *do* feel as if they have a right to the material comfort and convenience that their superior technology and science have produced. So strong is this feeling that psychologist Paul Wachtel, in his book *The Poverty of Affluence*, writes that "having more and newer things each year has become not just something we want but something we need. The idea of more, of ever increasing wealth, has become the center of our identity and our security, and we are caught by it as the addict by his drugs."¹

The American addiction to unbridled consumerism only promises to get worse. As plans for the implementation of multimedia technology take form—the so-called information superhighway touted by Vice-President Gore—priority is being given to the technology necessary for around-the-clock interactive shopping. Television sets are being transformed into electronic mail catalogues. The goal is to allow viewers to buy anything in the world, any time of day or night, without ever leaving their living rooms.

But why is this fantasy of effortless consuming so attractive? Why is it that when environmentalists speak of the need to reduce consumption

they arouse such intense anxiety, depression, rage, and even panic? Why is the consumer way of life nonnegotiable?

Fantasies of endless comfort and convenience, of every wish instantly becoming the world's command, are part of a syndrome that psychologists call narcissism. Narcissism is characterized by an inflated, grandiose, entitled, and masterful self-image, or "false self," that masks deep-seated but unacknowledged feelings of worthlessness and emptiness. Narcissistic individuals constantly strive to meet the impossibly high standards of their false self, frequently feeling frustrated and depressed by their inability to do so, but also avoiding at all costs recognizing how empty they truly feel.

Psychologist Philip Cushman has explicitly linked narcissism to consumer culture in the United States. He sees recent historical factors such as urbanization, industrialization, and secularization as having created an increasingly isolated and individualistic American self that bears the dual trademarks of narcissism: appearing "masterful and bounded" on the outside, yet "empty" underneath. American consumer habits reflect both the grandiose and the empty side of narcissism. In terms of the arrogant false self, Americans feel entitled to an endless stream of new consumer goods and services. Material abundance is not only an assumed privilege and a right of the middle and upper classes but proof of the cultural and political superiority of the United States.

At the same time, consumer practices serve to temporarily alleviate the anguish of an empty life. The purchase of a new product, especially a "big ticket" item such as a car or computer, typically produces an immediate surge of pleasure and achievement, and often confers status and recognition upon the owner. Yet as the novelty wears off, the emptiness threatens to return. The standard consumer solution is to focus on the next promising purchase. Perhaps the satisfaction will be more lasting and meaningful the next time. As Cushman describes it, the empty self

seeks the experience of being continually filled up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era. This response has been implicitly prescribed by a post-World War II economy that is dependent on the continual consumption of nonessential and

1. Paul Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1989), p. 71.

quickly obsolete items and experiences. In order to thrive, American society requires individuals who experience a strong "need" for consumer products and in fact demands them.²

By placing consumerism within the context of narcissism, Cushman has highlighted the psychological aspects of this culturewide problem. We can broaden his work to include an ecopsychological perspective by recognizing that First World consumer habits are one of the two most serious environmental issues the world faces. As Alan Durning states in his extensively researched book *How Much is Enough?*:

→ Only population growth rivals consumption as a cause of ecological decline, and at least population growth is now viewed as a problem by many governments and citizens of the world. Consumption, in contrast, is almost universally seen as a good—indeed, increasingly it is the primary goal of national economic policy.³

It is no coincidence that population growth has been recognized as a global ecological problem while consumerism remains in the good graces of so many governments and individuals. The situation would look quite different if billions of dollars a year were poured into sophisticated advertisements advocating the untold advantages of having many children. Imagine a world with billboards on all the highways depicting grandparents being joyously supported and loved by hordes of adoring children and grandchildren. Consider the impact of thousands of commercials parading the sexiest, happiest, most successful, and most talented people alive deliriously engaged in the daily ecstasy of huge extended families. In such a society, every nook and corner would bear a reminder of the wonders of population growth.

This, precisely, is the situation today regarding advertising and consumerism. Corporate advertising is likely the largest single psychological project ever undertaken by the human race, yet its stunning impact remains curiously ignored by mainstream Western psychology. We suggest that large-scale advertising is one of the main factors in American society that creates and maintains a peculiar form of narcissism ideally

2. Philip Cushman, "Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology," *American Psychologist* 45 (1990), 599–611.

3. Alan Durning, *How Much Is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 21.

suited to consumerism. As such, it creates artificial needs within people that directly conflict with their capacity to form a satisfying and sustainable relationship with the natural world.

Advertising, Technology, and Narcissism

It is far from clear that consumerism occurs naturally or spontaneously in humans. According to Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*, industrial leaders in the United States during the 1920s realized that the desire for non-essential goods and products was so weak that it needed active and ongoing cultivation: "The American economy, having reached the point where its technology was capable of satisfying basic material needs, now relied on the creation of new consumer demands—on convincing people to buy goods for which they are unaware of any need until the 'need' is forcibly brought to their attention by the mass media."⁴ Creating such false needs was not such an easy task. To do so, comments Benjamin Hunnicutt in *Work Without End*, American industry had to lean ever more heavily on

the hard work of investors, marketing experts, advertisers, and business leaders, as well as the spending examples set by the rich . . . [Realizing] this, the business community broke its long concentration on production, introduced the age of mass consumption, founded a new view of progress in an abundant society, and gave life to the advertising industry.⁵

As it stands today, the drenching of the psychological and physical environment with commercial messages has become so complete that people are largely numb to it. According to *Business Week*, the average American is exposed to about three thousand ads a day.⁶ Commercials continue to invade areas of life that were once immune to their presence. Movie producers are now routinely paid to place name-brand items in highly conspicuous spots in their films. Cosmonauts are hired to be filmed drinking a popular soda pop while in orbit. Ads are being printed

4. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 137.

5. Benjamin Hunnicutt, *Work Without End: Abandoning Shorter Hours for the Right to Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 42–43.

6. Mark Landler et al., "What Happened to Advertising?" *Business Week*, September 23, 1991.

to the commercials, which are always beckoning, always promising, always assuring that this time, with this product, it will be possible to fulfill the heart's desire.

Beyond instilling a belief in the wonders of consumption, corporations have worked hard to foster in Americans a fascination with acquiring the very latest commodities. To this end, commercials emphasize the status afforded those who own recently produced items. In 1990 this meant that 12,055 new products were introduced to American drugstores and supermarkets alone, a rate of thirty-three per day, many of them indistinguishable from one another except for packaging. The ecological destruction involved in manufacturing, transporting, marketing, packaging, and storing so many barely discernible items is, of course, immense.

The advertising industry thus subverts the broad and multifaceted human need for novelty by confining it to the narrow realm of new, or at least repackaged, consumer products. In the process it creates an environmentally damaging compulsion among Americans to own "brand new" products, regardless of their true quality. The emphasis on sheer newness also produces a psychological aversion toward technologies and products that are old, used, repaired, or recycled. The satisfaction and intimacy that come from carefully maintaining well-made objects are replaced by the short-lived, impersonal glamour of shiny plastic and gleaming metal.

Modern advertising also promotes an almost religious belief among Americans in the ultimate good of all technological progress, through its claim that there is a product to solve each of life's problems. By implication, material solutions can supplant social, psychological, and spiritual ones, and the cumulative output of multinational corporations represents the pinnacle of all human accomplishment. The United States considers itself the greatest nation on Earth in no small part because of its role as the industrial leader of the twentieth century.

Yet most people will never understand how their computer works nor be able to design an automobile engine. Thus they cannot directly participate in the great technological adventure. Advertisements cleverly offer a way around this predicament. They indicate that through owning sophisticated technology it is possible to identify with the scientific and engineering genius it took to produce it. Buying something is the next

best thing to making it. Each new purchase is a chance to ride on the cutting edge of human achievement. In this way the act of consuming technology becomes embedded in the consumer false self as a substitute for real creativity.

Ironically, the marketing industry has become so powerful that it now influences the direction of technological progress. It is a driving force behind the development of interactive media, which has been heralded as the next culture-transforming technology. Corporations are merging madly in order to control the huge markets that are anticipated once televisions, telephones, and computers have been successfully integrated and plugged into global electronic networks. The interactive nature of the media itself promises to be more engaging and convincing than television ever hoped to be. The potential impact of a virtual advertisement, which would create an irresistible multisensory experience for the viewer, is a marketer's dream.

Communication expert Mary King has been tracking the selling of interactive media to the American public. She writes that this new technology

is being promoted as a Sleeping Beauty story of imagination long dormant, woken by the kiss of a surprisingly affectionate human-computer interface. Among its many promoters, multimedia promises to wake us from our routine, uncreative existence, long cursed by one-way television, boring classroom lectures, stifling corporate hierarchy. Interactive media makes utopian promises about liberating the creative potential in all its users. In a weird sort of Pygmalion twist, it—the technology—is going to animate us—the humans.¹⁰

These are among the most grandiose claims for a new technology ever made. Beyond convenience and speed, interactive media will reach into our depths to free the imagination.

Not mentioned are the many social and psychological dangers of this technology. People will be vulnerable to a massive invasion of privacy. Huge inequities in access to the information superhighway will occur. Particularly disturbing is the practice of equating "virtual" experience with real life. Newspapers report "computer romances" between individuals who have never met in person, as if this were desirable. Children

10. Mary King, "Interactive Media and the Rhetoric of Empowerment," unpublished manuscript.

aversion toward recycled

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are drawn away from playing with their neighborhood friends in order to log on and interact through networks. Educators anticipate interactive programs that will eventually supplant teachers. They equate the computer's ability to match the learning pace of an individual student and instantly provide huge amounts of information with the warmth, care, and presence of an actual adult. Technology is not merely augmenting but *replacing* real human contact. Already Americans are alarmingly comfortable with this idea.

Similar trends are discernible for human interactions with the natural world. Interactive simulations of natural settings are being designed to be so convincing that they can substitute for truly "being there." Children brought up with this technology could easily come to prefer virtual nature to the real thing.

In short, the potential for manipulating the human mind through multimedia technology is likely to be greater than anything that has preceded it. The rational approach would be to proceed extremely carefully and slowly. But the false consumer self is emotionally incapable of such caution. The lure of fantastic new technologies that will propel American society to greater heights is too seductive.

Yet the pace of technological innovation is already so rapid that it is virtually impossible to stay abreast of it, even if one could afford to. We are no longer speaking of "keeping up with the Joneses," but of staying current with the combined output of the multinational corporations, who are far ahead of the Joneses. As a result, Americans chronically experience a sense of material inadequacy that is but momentarily alleviated by any given purchase. The gap between what society offers and what people can afford continually widens.

This gap is dramatically illustrated in a recent *San Francisco Chronicle* article on the growing number of Americans who earn over \$100,000 annually but "can't make ends meet." By "making ends meet," of course, they mean maintaining a standard of living that the rest of the world would see as luxurious. But skyrocketing mortgages, taxes, children's college tuitions, and a sagging economy are all making this impossible.

Visibly successful in their careers, by all accounts these high earners should be financially comfortable. Instead, their monetary struggles leave them feeling bitter and ineffective. The most common complaint

is that their life choices are severely restricted. Typical is one family who moved fifty miles from Manhattan in order to afford a new suburban home. Now the father spends nearly three hours a day commuting, frequently works Saturdays, and feels terrible that he has so little time for his two daughters. Many in the six-figure bracket spend all of their income each month, leaving them with no savings and constant angst about job security. Others overspend as a way to deny the limitations of their high incomes, and then feel trapped by enormous debt. On top of all this, there is external pressure to buy more. The wife in one couple with a newborn finds having an infant far more expensive than she had been told. She adds: "And then there are those fun gadgets, marketed in such a spectacular way. It makes you feel your child can't live without that Barney sleeping bag."¹¹

These "poor" well-to-do Americans, whose earnings are in the top 4 percent in the country, demonstrate how fully ingrained the consumer false self has come to be. In a moment of considerable triumph, the advertising industry has created false needs so potent that the most successful individuals in the richest country in the world perennially scramble to increase their ability to consume. They do so feeling frustrated and angry, but without seriously considering whether the enormous material wealth they have already accumulated is truly satisfying. As a crowning touch, the number of products available continues to increase, upping the number of items "necessary" to maintain a good standard of living, and these highly successful people fall even further behind.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, in *Outlaw Culture*, bell hooks speaks to the devastating effects of "systems of representation," such as advertising and other forms of media, on poor people:

Socialized by film and television to identify with the attitudes and values of privileged classes in this society, many people who are poor, or a few paychecks away from poverty, internalize fear and contempt for those who are poor. When materially deprived teenagers kill for tennis shoes or jackets they are not doing so because they like those items so much. They also hope to

11. Ilyce Glink, "Farewell to Easy Street," *San Francisco Chronicle, This World*, December 19, 1993, p. 5.

escape the stigma of their class by appearing to have the trappings of more privileged classes. Poverty, in their minds and in our society as a whole, is seen as synonymous with depravity, lack, and worthlessness.¹²

A sense of worthlessness, we would add, that fits precisely with our understanding of media-induced narcissistic injury. Within these poor communities, we again find an injured self striving to overcome the humiliation of material lack, yet so caught up in this struggle that it fails to challenge the consumer ideal of the dominant culture.

Further, hooks suggests that pervasive media images of the American Dream have stripped away the sense of dignity and integrity in living simply that was present in her parents' and grandparents' generations. This ability to find meaning and grace in a materially humble life is a hallmark of ecological sanity that has been undermined and nearly destroyed by the messages of corporate advertising.

Thus, no matter where we look, from the frantic and unhappy scrambling of successful professionals to the insult added to injury among the oppressed and disadvantaged, the media-induced consumer false self continues to wreak psychological havoc across the American landscape.

Beyond Narcissism

For American society to become ecologically sustainable, the narcissistic wounding of the public by the advertising industry will have to stop. The currently lost capacity to live in balance with nature will need to be rediscovered and revitalized. Does this mean that every consumer needs to see a therapist? We think not. But by applying our understanding of narcissism to consumerism, ecopsychologists can join forces with the environmental movement on a number of different levels, and in so doing enhance the efforts of both psychologists and activists.

When working with individual narcissists, therapists engage in an intricate three-step process. This involves alternatively challenging the lies of the false self, empathically understanding and "containing" the pain and panic that arise as the false self crumbles, and helping clients to identify, awaken, and nourish long-dormant needs, abilities, and inclinations buried and denigrated by the false self.

12. bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 168–69.

A similar multifaceted approach could be used to inspire people to free themselves from the grip of the false consumer self. First, such a program would involve drawing public attention to the massive psychological damage being done by corporate advertising. We would suggest focusing particularly on the vulnerability of American children, who are growing up in an environment of commercial lies and manipulations that is tantamount to corporate child abuse. It would also mean recasting the American love affair with technology as a form of dependence that limits creativity and narrows experience.

As important as these efforts are, there are pitfalls to focusing exclusively on the downside of consumerism. As we have noted, as consumers Americans have already been made to feel deeply inadequate. This sense of inadequacy in turn drives them to continue consuming so outrageously. When they are then criticized for excessive materialism, there is a danger that these admonishments will primarily increase their overall sense of failure rather than significantly alter their environmental habits. We see this today as Americans recycle and support environmental legislation, yet continue to purchase far beyond their means, all the while feeling inadequate both as environmentally responsible citizens and as consumers.

As Theodore Roszak has noted, the environmental movement may have overutilized "shame and blame" tactics in its approach to the public. After years of discouraging news about the state of the environment and dire predictions for the future, people are feeling numb and overwhelmed. In such a state they are particularly vulnerable to right-wing attempts to engineer a "green backlash." The backlash serves as an opportunity for people to avoid guilt and helplessness and to attack the activists who make them feel that way. The same pattern occurs on an individual level when a therapist too aggressively confronts narcissistic beliefs or is insensitive to the pain of a deteriorating false self. When this happens, clients will take any excuse to reembrace their grandiose beliefs, go back into denial, and vilify both therapists and therapy.

It is here that the second step is needed. Concomitant with publicly challenging the consumer false self, ecopsychologists can provide supportive and "guilt-free" contexts in which people can address the complex emotional side of environmental change. There is a great deal of loss involved in giving up the fantasy of a consumer paradise or in falling out

of love with technology. Alternative, more sustainable ways of living are bound to appear boring and perhaps even depressing in comparison. Doubt and despair will emerge as people ponder whether change is possible or worth the effort.

As we have discovered in ecopsychology workshops, in a nonjudgmental environment people have much to say about their consumption habits, and do so eagerly. Participants have described a variety of ways that shopping meets, albeit poorly, a host of nonmaterial needs. Especially for women, senior citizens, and adolescents, malls are among the few safe public places to be with other people. Shopping is a less-than-satisfying substitute for actually making things. It is something to do to alleviate depression or celebrate good news, although afterward people frequently wish they had not splurged. We have also heard fascinating speculations about whether malls and supermarkets are the only remaining outlets for satisfying the ancient impulse for gathering food, which for most of human history was the primary means by which people fed themselves. In modern supermarkets, however, gathering is an activity divorced from the cycles of nature, the sources of the food itself, and from the community.

As consumption habits become a legitimate psychological issue, we will learn much more about the ambivalence that many Americans harbor regarding the materialistic nature of their society. At present we hear many stories of therapists reducing their clients' environmental concerns to the "human-only" world, such that dreams about ecological destruction or anxiety concerning pollution and toxic waste are "interpreted" as being symbolic of relationships with parents or important others. In the process, genuine concerns about the natural world are dismissed or simply ignored. Similarly, therapists fail to take seriously the substantial amount of increased stress and depression during the holiday season that is *directly* attributable to the environmentally disastrous commercialization of the last two months of the year. We suspect that the holiday "blues" would be far less severe if people could be freed from expensive obligatory gift giving and instead developed more heart-felt—and ecological—ways to celebrate with their friends and families.

This brings us to the third part of our multifaceted approach to the consumer false self: ecopsychologists can identify and nurture dormant qualities of the self that flourish when connected with the natural world.

The range of untapped capacities is immense. Many forms of pleasure that have been numbed by urban living, from bodily to perceptual to aesthetic to spiritual, come back to life in natural settings. These experiences can form the basis for an expanded sense of self, or what Deep Ecologists call an ecological self. There are many forms the ecological self can take, as we know from the enormous variation in cultural identity found among indigenous peoples.

We can anticipate that, in actively fostering an ecological self, people will experience periods of guilt and shame over their previously negligent or destructive environmental behavior, as well as a desire to make amends. Similar reactions toward past transgressions are quite common in therapy as individuals begin to change. However, when "environmental remorse" arises as part of a healing process and in direct response to a strengthening bond with the land, it leads to more substantial and pervasive change than that induced by moral condemnation and other types of external coercion.

It is common for ecopsychologists whose work includes long wilderness trips or intense urban restoration projects to report dramatic breakthroughs that shake individuals to their core. When the natural world reawakens in every fiber of our being the primal knowledge of connection and graces us with a few moments of sheer awe, it can shatter the hubris and isolation so necessary to narcissistic defenses. Once this has happened, ongoing contact with nature can keep these insights alive and provide the motivation necessary for continued change. It is these experiences that will ultimately fill the empty self and heal the existential loneliness so endemic to our times.