

Shrink Rap Radio #28, March 23, 2006. Ecopsychology, Terrapsychology, and The Soul of Place

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Craig Chalquist
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: *“What I wanted to do for my research was explore the indigenous idea that places actually have qualities of psyche. And of course this is an old idea, it’s across all different cultures, all our ancestors believed it before the rise of the West. And in fact parts of the ancient West still believed it; in Rome they talked about a *genus loci* - a spirit of place. So it’s this old idea that places have some kind of animated presence: an imaginal presence to put it in Jungian terms.”*

Introduction: Those are the reflections of Dr. Craig Chalquist, who is an ecopsychologist, and who later this year will be bringing out a new book on something he calls “terrapsychology”, a field he’s pioneering. The interview you are about to hear is actually the first time Dr. Chalquist and I met face to face. However he lives not far from me, and he is teaching part time in the Depth Psychology program at Sonoma State University, the place where I’ve also taught for many years. He contacted me after he happened to see a posting about Shrink Rap Radio on a local online bulletin board. So we decided to get together for this chat.

Dr. Dave: Craig Chalquist – welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Chalquist: Thank you for having me here.

Dr. Dave: Really glad to have you here. No I know that you’re an ecopsychologist. Let me have you start out by telling our audience what ecopsychology is.

Chalquist: Ecopsychology, to put it kind of briefly, is the study of our psychological relationship with the environment. But I want to qualify that right at the beginning by saying that it’s different from simply looking at things like how facets of the environment impact our behaviour, that kind of thing. It looks more deeply at the interactions between us and the world around us. So Ecopsychology tries to break down some of the traditional barriers between inner and outer psychology and the world.

Dr. Dave: OK, now are you an ecologist who became a psychologist? Or what's the relationship between that: there's a scientific field known as ecology, there's another scientific field known as psychology and this is kind of a new field - ecopsychology. What's the relationship between the two?

Chalquist: It's kind of a blend of psychology and ecology. It came out of a study group that was going on in San Francisco in the early 1990's, and a book came out of that, this one here Ecopsychology, edited by Kanner, Rozak, and Gomes. And the concern in those days was that psychology was ignoring a lot that was important for clients: understanding their behaviour, things that went on in the session but also reflected things that went on in the world. So it began as a look at clinical issues, but also included things like deep ecology, and other fields that were studying why our relationship with the environment is so very problematic. So it draws a bit on ecological science, but it's actually more concerned with the psychology of the human world relationship.

Dr. Dave: OK I didn't know that it evolved out of clinical concerns, in other words there was some sense that people in therapy, all their problems were not necessarily internal, but somehow could be a reflection of things happening in the environment.

Chalquist: Yes, there were several sources of that. Not everybody that was initially interested in ecopsychology was a clinician or a psychotherapist. So it was several different fields that came together in this one very interesting point in history in California.

Dr. Dave: Yes, as so many things seem to come together here in Northern California. So what is it that drew you to this kind of work – ecopsychology?

Chalquist: My original training was actually in pretty traditional psychotherapy; and I spent 9 years doing couples and individual and family therapy, and also running groups, primarily men's groups.

And when I got into my doctoral level of studies I began having dreams about places; places that I had lived in. I am a native to California and I grew up in San Diego. And the places that I had lived, and was living in at the time began to appear in my dreams but in personified form. And I have done a lot of dream work but none of the dream theory, including Jung's, were helpful for me to understand what these figures were trying to say. So

at that point I began wondering exactly who they were and what they were talking about.

Dr. Dave: This is great because I didn't know we were going to end up talking about dreams at all, and my last show was about dreams and I think a number of future ones will be as well, so that's an interest we have in common. Now were you part of that study group that you mentioned?

Chalquist: No, that was before I got interested in the field itself.

Dr. Dave: OK. So how does one become an ecopsychologist? Let's say somebody listens to this interview today and they say, man that guy's into some great stuff! How can I become one of those?

Chalquist: As far as I know, there's no doctoral level certification program yet for ecopsychology. I'm considered primarily an ecopsychologist on the strength of my dissertation, which was overseen by people like Mary Watkins and Chellis Glendinning. And I studied the relationships between human psychological symptoms and certain forms of acting out in psychopathology in relation to historical happenings in California. So I started to draw those parallels. But I think there were some masters level programs for ecopsych but it has never been one of those fields that particularly lends itself to certification or institutionalisation. There's lots of attempts going on to get it in that kind of a situation but so far it hasn't happened.

Dr. Dave: Do you think it might make it, or not?

Chalquist: As a field you mean?

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Chalquist: Yes it's very prolific, there's a lot going on in the field right now. But even back in that original group of people that were studying these ideas, there was a tension between letting the field naturally unfold organically and stimulate lots of individual research; as opposed to institutionalising it, holding the standards of natural science to it and that kind of thing. So that's still out there.

Dr. Dave: OK, I'm curious about the dissertation that you mentioned. Can you give us a quick example - I think you said you studied psychopathology and how external events had an impact. Is there a case or an example that comes to mind of that?

Chalquist: One that I went through when I first returned to San Diego during my doctoral work, was that I noticed I was a lot more depressed than I had been in other places. And the massive overbuilding of San Diego that had taken place while I had gone, you know from crowded freeways to the huge military presence down there was recurring in my dreams; although I was trying to ignore it and get to what I thought was my real field work - which was working with poor people in the city.

So when figures in my dreams begin showing up and saying: you need to look at this, you need to look at that, and take a look at the very things you've been ignoring - I began to understand that there was some kind of a connection, as they say intrapsychically, internally, between the state of the city and my depression and the defensiveness I felt when I was down there.

Dr. Dave: Fascinating. I'm not aware of that having impacted my dreams, but when we first moved to Sonoma County it was country! Now we have crowded freeways, and they are talking about building a casino less than a mile away from my house, and they are throwing up housing everywhere. And it is depressing to me, and I have to restrain myself to keep from boringly commenting on it every time I pass a new development, and driving my friends and my wife crazy with my concern about it.

Now I went to your website, very interesting website - you have several websites actually. I went to one of them and saw that you describe yourself as a terrapsychologist; so I wonder what you mean by that and what the difference between an ecopsychologist and a terrapsychologist is?

Chalquist: Ecopsychology, for all the depth that it includes predominantly still stays on the human side of the human nature, bonding, connection, whatever you want to call it - relationship. What I wanted to do for my research was explore the indigenous idea that places actually have qualities of psyche.

Of course this is an old idea, it's across all different cultures, all our ancestors believed it before the rise of the West. And in fact parts of the ancient West still believed it; like in Rome they talked about *genus loci* - a spirit of place. So it's this old idea that places have some kind of animated presence: an imaginal presence to put it in Jungian terms. And that the world itself was ensouled in the way that Hillman talked about in this first anthology, *Ecopsychology*: that the world is reactive in ways that we have not really understood in the West, and are ignoring because our industrial activities depend on regarding the world as lifeless.

So the idea I played with was - and David Orr asks this question in his writings as well – if the earth is somehow alive, if it has some kind of sensitivity that is in an interactive field with our own, how would I know that? What sort of things would it do to get my attention? So I began examining the history of California somewhat as a therapist examines a client’s case history, only in my case I did a “place history” and I began to look for themes and pathologies that seemed to be evidence of psychic reactivity.

Dr. Dave: Wow, two places that come up for me as I hear you talk about this is: one, thinking of Chinese Feng Shui which has very much some of the quality of what you are talking about. There is actually a shopping centre near here in Corda Madera, I don’t know if you are aware of it – the town shopping centre in Corda Madera? Well that place used to be like this really depressing, urban sprawl kind of shopping centre. And they transformed it into this really wonderful place that feels like you are in a little Italian village just by putting up some facades, and a water fountain and having sort of a winding path that you follow as you move between the various commercial establishments and restaurants and so on. And I found it to be a delightful place, and I found myself hanging out there a lot with friends, and noticing that other people were hanging out there a lot, and children were just drawn to this fountain and it was just mobbed with children around this fountain. Some time later I learned that the architect who was responsible for this remodel had used the principles of Feng Shui. That has been my only real contact with it but I have to say – wow! That worked.

The other place that resonated for me as you were talking about the spirit of place, I’ve been to Escalon in Big Sur, and boy when you are on those grounds in Big Sur, with cliffs overlooking the ocean with the knowledge that Native Americans once owned, controlled or lived on, not owned but lived on this place – you can just feel it.

Chalquist: Yes you can.

Dr. Dave: Now from your website I see that you have a book that’s coming out this year?

Chalquist: Yes, in the Fall.

Dr. Dave: That’s great, so you’ve already got a publisher for it?

Chalquist: Yes Spring Books and Publications is bringing it out.

Dr. Dave: Oh right, that must be very exciting. It's called *Terrapsychology: A New (and Ancient) Paradigm for Engaging the World's Soul*. So in a few words, what's the premise of the book?

Chalquist: After six years of academic writing it was a challenge for me to try to put it in more ordinary language, so I really struggled to do that in the book, especially around what the central premise of terrapsychology is. Which is someplace in Jung's collected works - I think it's in *Psychology and Alchemy* - he makes the comment "the unconscious turns towards us the face that we turn toward it."

So if we repress things into unconsciousness they surge back up into consciousness in the form of symptoms or acting out, with the same psychic force. The premise of terrapsychology is that psyche isn't confined to a nervous system, that's it's a quality of being, as indigenous people have always said in their myths. There is a tradition in the West called panpsychism that holds the same thing: that it's a dimension of being rather than something that's just characteristic of us.

In any case the premise in terrapsychology is that this presence which animates everything including the land, behaves similarly to the way Jung says the unconscious behaves. So if we pave over a place or treat it lovelessly, then it begins working its way into our complexes as Jung called them, our symptoms, our relationship troubles. It's almost as though there are suddenly parallels between polluted bays and polluted moods, or congested traffic arteries and congested hearts. But if we treat places with respect, which I think is part of the energy of Feng Shui - actually regarding the qualities of a place as important and worthy of respect - then the relationship becomes different. And it's almost as though the place itself holds us in some way; and some of us even get the feeling that places enjoy being appreciated somehow, kind of an intuitive sense. And you see that a lot in sacred sites that have a lot of people visiting them.

Dr. Dave: Yes. This sounds like stuff that would be very hard to kind of prove in a scientific way, but it certainly resonates with me as I hear you talk about it. And I love that quote that you gave from Jung, say that again, I like that.

Chalquist: "the unconscious turns towards us the face that we turn toward it."

Dr. Dave: That's worth thinking about at some length I think.

Now also on your website I discover that you're involved in a number of fascinating projects, one of which is called "Glass Hand". So what's project Glass Hand about? And why did you call it Glass Hand?

Chalquist: Actually I got the name from an old Outer Limits episode – I like to watch old science fiction. And there's an episode about a man who wakes up in a city and doesn't know his identity or who he is; and he's in danger. And the only thing he has to help him is a glass hand, which is a computerised hand that talks to him. So he asks it for information and it gives him responses: go over there, and do this, and try that out.

And my thought was with all the flooding and global weather changes going on, it might be useful for people to have a downloadable document that tells them what do in any kind of a crisis, for instance a flood. Where to go for local food supplies, shelter, that kind of thing. And documents like that can be downloaded now into a number of different things – there's those little flash drives you can buy at the store for about \$30 and carry them wherever you go, they're really small, on a keychain even. So my thought was for a group of people to start working on documents like that, and it would be an approach from several different perspectives: medical, what to do in terms of first aid; there could be a local aspect, where to go when there's a fire, that kind of thing. And I was hoping at some point to get cities involved in that so they would have such documents at their website, but that's still in the process of congealing.

Dr. Dave: So basically it's emergency information, to cover a wide variety of emergencies, and as much as possible also localised to particular environments where people might live. And one of the things I read on the website is that not only might you be able to download it into a flash drive or thumb drive but also maybe into an ipod or laptop or whatever electronics, a cell phone even, some of the newer cell phones.

I was struck by your self description on your website, that read: author, ecopsychologist, former counsellor to men and women arrested for violent crimes, conflict resolution facilitator, survivor of the North Ridge earthquake, various brushfires, five years of poverty, three near drownings, three attempted robberies, two nearby lightning strikes, a car crash and a tornado.

Chalquist: Wherever I go, happiness follows.

(laughter)

Dr. Dave: I must say that's an unusual resume. Did that get you a lot of jobs?

Chalquist: Not too many so far (laughter). I am employed! You must be talking about the emergency information part. There are other parts of the website that have somewhat different credentials in terms of teaching experience, things like that.

Being in all those disasters actually is another factor that got me interested in not only the presence of place but how we should encounter it, in terms of preparedness and respect for what nature can do.

Dr. Dave: Three attempted robberies, I'm curious about that one.

Chalquist: Let's see, one was a break-in that occurred when I was living in Calabasas in Los Angeles County; another was a street corner incident in Oxnard where I believe I almost got mugged. And what was the third one ... I know there was another one – I'm forgetting at the moment.

Dr. Dave: Repressed, no doubt.

Chalquist: Yes (laughing).

Dr. Dave: Speaking of emergencies and so on, we hear of so many impending ecological disasters. Which one keeps you awake at night these days?

Chalquist: Oh they all do. From a terrapsychological standpoint, we have begun - me and a handful of people who are working on this – to wonder whether what seem to be increasing incidents of global weather changes, Katrina like storm incidents and things like that – are not just by-products of global warming but whether they can actually be interpreted like symbols.

It struck me that when as Katrina was barreling toward our gulf coast, heading right for all those oil refineries, the US was endeavouring to substantiate its stranglehold on oil in another gulf. And it was almost as though the one was sort of an instinctive reaction to the other in a sense.

Dr. Dave: That could be a slippery slope, it occurs to me, because some fundamentalist types would interpret the storm as god's retribution on homosexuals or some other group.

Chalquist: Which they have. In the book I've talked about the terrapsychological opinion about this as the third alternative to either the fundamentalist punishment paradigm – you know, god hates the gays and so he's going to destroy New Orleans, that kind of thing. Or on the other hand the scientific paradigm: it's all just random weather, there's no meaning or order in it.

The terrapsychological idea is that the land behaves very much like the unconscious at the deeper layers; when you push on it then it reacts blindly. It's similar to the way Jung describes certain psychic activities at the deep level. If you take a really primary passion or drive and you repress it, it becomes like an animal in a cage after a while, and it will strike out. And there is no intention of punishment or anything like that, it's just a reactive blind response; which makes it very dangerous of course.

Dr. Dave: Yes that's a great metaphor. And I just saw that movie about the guy who went to live and study with the grisly bears in Alaska, and ended up getting eaten! He kind of discovered about the wild, blind dangerousness of nature.

Chalquist: Yes - I think it's a big mistake to romanticise nature, the way some people do. There's the idea abroad that nature is an all giving mother that is always kind and that sort of thing.

Dr. Dave: That's an interesting observation to hear from you, because I think a lot of people would immediately go, oh this guy is an ecopsychologist – he's a tree hugger!

Chalquist: Yes. If the reactivity part is valid – in other words if our behaviour and the earth's behaviour have something to do with each other - then it would stand to reason that if our activities toward the earth are beneficial for the earth and ourselves, then we won't have so many of these terrible reactions and problems to face. But as a culture our activities are tremendously destructive to the planet, so no wonder it's aroused.

Dr. Dave: Now if you could impress one point upon our listeners that they would carry away with them; what would you want that be?

Chalquist: I would ask them to try an experiment, because experiment is at the heart of what all this is about. We don't have a lot of statistics or numbers to shore it up with and I'm not sure that would be much use anyway. But what I recommend doing, is walk outside and try to get a

sense, sort of invite the place to say something; ask for a response. And you can do this in dreams too; you can lay down at night and kind of get a feeling of the place all around you and say: what is it you want me to know? And then see what happens, because that's what sort of got me on this path.

Dr. Dave: Well that sounds like an experiment that anyone can try. I hope they will, and I'd be interested in hearing from listeners, hearing back what comes up for them. And I will pass along to you any information if I hear from some folks; maybe get some emails or some voice mails if I keep pulling for it, trying to get people to respond.

Chalquist: Great.

Dr. Dave: Tell us a bit about your educational background.

Chalquist: My original bachelor degree was in psychology and I learnt just enough psychology in college to be interested in therapy; so I have a masters degree in marriage and family therapy from California Lutheran University, and practiced in that capacity for that nine year period. My doctoral degree is specifically in Depth Psychology with traditions that came from Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Jung and some would add Joseph Campbell; and then all the work that came after that, looking at the relationship between the conscious and unconscious.

Dr. Dave: And that was at the Pacifica Institute was it?

Chalquist: Pacifica Graduate Institute.

Dr. Dave: Ah yes that's it. Because people might want to know, because there aren't that many places that one can go to get a Ph.D. in that sort of thing. And how did you find that program? I mean how was it for you?

Chalquist: Oh it was wonderful. The presence and the stupendous learning of some of the scholars that teach at Pacifica is incredible. I studied with people like Mary Watkins who has taught and presented at more schools than I could even think about – if you look at her CV the list is just endless, and her areas of expertise – liberation psychology, child psychology, adoption, all over the place. A lot of the people at Pacifica have those kind of incredible credentials, and to sit with them and learn and hear about things that they have done in terms of pushing the boundaries of ordinary psychology was just such a marvellous experience for me.

Dr. Dave: I can't help but feel a little bit jealous because I went through such a very traditional doctoral program at the University of Michigan and it almost makes me want to go back and have that kind of an experience.

As you look back on your life so far, is there a time or an incident that stands out as a major turning point?

Chalquist: I would have to say in the middle of my doctoral field work at Pacifica. I had been living in San Diego, and when I began dreaming about places starting with San Diego that was shattering to me. That more than anything determined the course that I embarked on after that. Because my desire was to do pretty much mainstream psychotherapy for the rest of my life, and eventually become a licensed psychologist and work in session with people. And I had no idea that I would ever have the passion that I do now for ecological work. So that dream was really pivotal.

Dr. Dave: Wow. And maybe that speaks to this next question or maybe something else will come up. Which is, how has psychology helped in your own life? Is there a critical incident in your own life in which something you knew about psychology helped to pull you through?

Chalquist: I would have to say, well too many to think of, I've had a lot of therapy myself, both individual and couples. I was married at one time and we had a lot of marital therapy, and all the therapy that I've received has been very helpful. I've always been lucky enough to find really good therapists and then I had really good teachers in both programs; so all of that really fed me.

But the one that popped into my head when you said that, was when I was still in college as a sophomore. I didn't know what I wanted to study; and I got bored one day and I went to the bookstore, and I bought two books. And I remember looking at the shelf – oh psychology, I don't know what this is, something about human behaviour. (laughing) A very American definition of it, the external: how we behave not how we feel. And the books were Karen Horney's *Self Analysis*. Karen Horney's *The Psychoanalyst*, and Abraham Maslow's *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. And when I started reading those books, which I did after staring at them for about two weeks, I was just thunderstruck by how much sense they made. And since then I've moved on from some of the positions in those books but I'll never forget the inspiration that they gave me.

Dr. Dave: That's great. Since we are on books, one of my standard questions is whether or not there is a book that you would recommend to

listeners who want to learn more about ecopsychology. And I suspect that the book you would recommend is the one that's on your lap, and I'll put a link to it on the site.

Chalquist: Yes, still the standard.

Dr. Dave: It's *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, it's edited by Theodore Rozak, and Mary Gomes who is one of my colleagues here at Sonoma State, and her husband Allen Kanner. What a small world. (laughter)

So to wrap things up, if you were to give our listeners a call to action, what would that be?

Chalquist: To find out more about ecopsychology.

Actually, even before that; and this is a somewhat painful thing for some of us to do at first. But we live in a culture where there are infinite distractions available from the problems of the day.

What I might start with is similar to what any good therapy often starts with, which is not exploring the joys and happinesses of our lives, but where things hurt, where things are not moving forward and feel stuck. So a good starting point might be to actually listen to some of the environmental news, or see some of what's going on in the world in terms of how much of the biosphere we are using up, and spend a moment feeling how that feels.

Dr. Dave: The doctor has prescribed strong medicine. (laughter)

Thank you very much Craig, and I'd love to have you back sometime, this is fascinating material and I think you probably got your finger on a bunch of other stuff that would be of interest to our listeners; so we'll try to get you back, OK?

Chalquist: Great.