

Michael Cohen: The *Ecopsychology* Interview

Project NatureConnect
Friday Harbor, Washington.

In this interview, Michael Cohen shares his methods for facilitating sensory connections to nature settings and beliefs about their therapeutic benefit and influences on identity. Michael discusses his long career facilitating outdoor education in the United States and abroad and describes the development of his career from his education at Columbia Teacher's College in New York in the 1950s, through direction of various outdoor education programs, and a key personal revelation experienced in Grand Canyon in 1965. Michael also talks about his childhood upbringing in the progressive Sunnyside Gardens community of Queens, NY, his involvement in the folk music movement, and important books that influenced his thinking. The text of this interview was adapted from a telephone conversation with the Ecopsychology editor Thomas Joseph Doherty.



Michael Cohen: Back in 1952, when I was in graduate school at Columbia [Teachers College], Paul Brandwein took a group of us who were biology majors out on a field trip. This was a school that was divided because Teachers College was based on the progressive education of John Dewey while many of the students also coming in came from very formal schools and teaching settings. So, there was always a lot of discussion and argument between students. But when they went out on these field trips, they all got together fine and these trips were the highlight of what we were doing. I asked Paul what he thought about that and he said, "Well, we are getting away from our problems."

It never struck me that he was saying we were going to something that somehow had the power to alleviate these problems. So, I always had that in mind and was continually looking for what was happening in nature that made this happen—"What were we going to?" was really my question.

I worked in summer camps in the field of what was called "progressive camping," which is progressive education applied to camping settings based on a book called *Creative Camping* by Joshua Lieberman (1931)—whom I worked for in the 1950s. I became the Director of the American Youth Hostels and then founded my own program, The Trailside Summer Camps or Outdoor Education programs. These were based on taking people into natural areas and using what you would have to call good group work and consensus experiences and self-organization. We'd go on trips and explore natural areas. Students would ask questions as they came up.

By doing this, I began to recognize there are all kinds of things that nature was giving as answers or responses as to what was going on there and why these groups of students coming off of the summer

E *ecopsychology:* Michael, I would like to give readers a background on some of your activities over the years: Your experiences facilitating Project NatureConnect and earlier initiatives, and your work with people all over the world, using the Internet and e-mail as a teaching tool. I was wondering if you could go back in time to when you first began this work in the late 1950s and early 1960s with programs such as the Audubon Expedition Institute. Can you paint us a picture of what was going on in your mind and in your students' minds at that time?

INTERVIEW

program were in much better shape than when they came in. Some of the results were spectacular. The program grew almost exponentially because of the popularity of the results. So, I kept on that track looking for and asking about what was happening in the relationship between ourselves and nature.

In 1966, I had an experience in the Grand Canyon that I have described in lots of different places. The temperature was about 120 degrees [Fahrenheit]. I felt my stomach. It was ice cold. I realized that I was like a refrigerator walking there. I could explain this through perspiration cooling me off as it evaporated. But then this thunderstorm came in and it turned the temperature down to 65 [degrees] from 120. It was a very powerful storm that we did not expect in the month of August, coming over the Tonto Plateau, and it actually reached the bottom of the canyon. The Colorado River turned to what you would have to call a blood red. The whole inner gorge was covered with this red clay falling into the river.

I had the apparition that I was standing in an artery or vein of a living organism and here is all this blood running through (because that is what it looked like in old movies in health classes, this kind of a picture of inside of the body). So, I am standing there and then I recognized that there were these temperature differences and that all these salts that were running into the river were running out into the sea, but the sea never got saltier.

All of a sudden, I started asking, "How am I different than the planet?" It is doing the same thing that I was doing. I was cooling off. It was cooling off. It was taking in salts, but was not getting any saltier. It was self-regulating like I was. So, I spent an hour or so just measuring up all the things from the sciences as to what was happening to my body, based a lot on the work of *The Wisdom of the Body*, a book by a Walter Cannon (1929), a great book that still holds true today, showing the body was homeostatic. And, the planet was homeostatic! I could not find any difference between the planet and myself and all of a sudden it just hit me that the planet had to be alive, if I was alive. We were identical.

That changed my focus enough so that I started doing environmental education interpretations within my own program based on the concept that the planet acted like, and was, a living organism. We were identical to it.

This brought in all kinds of ideas that had never been brought in before and are still resisted today: That the planet responds to sensory experiences or sensitivities and that they are based on attractions that hold the planet together and hold us together. And so I thought of using that as an interpretation and then brought the psyche into it and these activities have been the core of the work I have done since then.

You do not have to turn to books and research to find answers alone. You go right to the planet and if you become at one with it, you think like the planet works. It touches your senses and all of a sudden you can make sense of your life because of what is sitting in the subconscious—we call it the subconscious because we will not allow it to be conscious. We cover it up. We conquer nature and to conquer nature we are conquering these senses because they are nature. And so we end up with our mentality with these two lines [of development], one of which is literate and has a story that says, "Do not pay attention to your needs, drives, wants, instincts. Do not pay attention to how they are actually expressing themselves as sensations. That is all subjective. But what is objective is the material world and what we can measure and work with in a sterile situation (temperature and pressure, etc.) and therefore the truth comes out of that."

Well, of course, the planet does not work that way. It is always changing and so we end up with a story that is distorted in terms of how the planet works and we impose the story as if the planet has not got any rights or sensitivities. "We are different than it, etc., etc."—and we end up with this huge breach which was noted in the late 1940s in books such as *Plundered Planet* [Fairfield Osborne, 1948], which was a bestseller, and another that was even bigger than that, *The Road to Survival* [William Vogt, 1948].

So, I became aware of this and I became aware that you could change things if you could change the bonds that held you—these sensitivities, these natural senses that held you to a story and bonded you to the story—and instead allow yourself to have the energy and the support to actually [bond] to nature itself. If you did that, there was no story in nature. Nature is a nonliterate, nonlinguistic way of relating that produces its own perfection.

I would have people go to natural areas and then bond to something that made sense based on what they experienced at the natural area, in contact with what you have to call "the heart of its own authority." The fountainhead of authority about nature would be nature itself. It brings us to be part of it through these natural senses.

Except we spend 99.9% of our time not being connected to nature, making up these stories. We say the stories are true because we can make them objective, objective meaning: objective to the senses. And so we end up in this dichotomy of being bonded to the "story world," which is out of sync and actually conquers or exploits or is prejudiced against the natural world and calls it unintelligent because it does not think the way we do.

So that is what the heart of this is, and then I have developed more and more different activities (there are about 160 of them now) where I have found different places where we disconnect from nature. We do an activity that explains the disconnection, go into the natural

world, find out what attractions are working, make that contact, and then verbalize that contact until it has got it into our mentality, both from the authority in nature and from the story that we are indoctrinated with and socialized into. But, now nature is part of both of them because of the activity.

When you get nature working and highly involved in the story world as well as validated in the nonstory world of our mentality, then nature is whole. When nature is whole, it starts doing exactly what it does everywhere else. It starts restoring, recycling, renewing, purifying and it does that to our psyche [as well]. That is really what the value of this and you can do this anytime. You can do it with a potted plant. You can do it with your pet. You can do it in natural areas. But you have to be able to have a way of thinking that validates it rather than just having it be recreation or being discarded as not being realistic.

EP: Thanks Michael, that's a great introduction. I want to segue from your last point about validation. One of the ways that I see your work is it validates people's sense of an ecological self. It gives them a way of understanding and putting into the "story world," as you say, the nonverbal, sensory experiences they have. I have been familiar with your activities since the early 1990s and have been looking at a copy of *Well Mind, Well Earth* (1995) that I pulled off my shelf.

Michael Cohen: Actually, this was published in *The Humanistic Psychologist* as an article back in 1993, called "Integrated Ecology, the Process of Counseling with Nature." I looked at it recently and nothing much has changed about what I was talking about then. My model, which I call a "web-string model," is the model of the web of life and the strands are actually the natural senses that attract us or endear us to nature. If you do not get to that activity, then you are really back in the story world, back in the prejudice and the bias of it so you cannot get out of it.

EP: I can appreciate that. There is an essential tension between the story world and the experiential world, the embedded world. That is why I see, for example, the tradition of gestalt therapy being very strong in ecopsychology, because it is about here-and-now, lived experience, and concepts like contacts and boundaries. I think it is possible to validate much of your work though it requires very sophisticated and respectful ways of study.

I find that many people are familiar with you because your Web site is often one of the first places that people come to when they are doing their own research, because of your long presence on the Internet, and because of the distance courses you have offered. I came upon your work quite early on after having my own experiences working in wilderness therapy and as a river guide in Grand Canyon.

So, I was quite prepared for this, to see your work as validating my sense of an ecological self. I think you are quite a trailblazer and in using technology to get your word out and to help people to communicate across vast distances. For example, at the time I was introduced to your work, I had a close friend who was doing your online course. But, he was working in Antarctica. . . .

Michael Cohen: Right, McMurdo [Field Station], I think it was.

EP: Yes. I was wondering if you could share any interesting stories about how your work has translated internationally.

Michael Cohen: Basically the process of doing this is (1) making contact with nature on a nonverbal level, (2) becoming literate with it, and (3) sharing the literacy, which I do by Internet and e-mail. And when you share the literacy, it is talking about the senses and what you felt and experienced where you are in the world, including Antarctica. And so what comes out of it is no matter what country it is or what nationality or religion, as long as you stick to reporting what you are sensing from a natural area, which is understood through e-mail and is read and received in a gratifying way, even though it might be from a different culture and a different place, because this sensitivity to nature is inherent in these 53 natural senses that I identified in language and have been researched in developmental psychology. As soon as these senses register, you can feel thirsty in any language or any culture you want—you still feel thirsty and you still feel you need some liquid or water to fulfill that, whether you know the word "thirst" or whether you have no language at all. You still relate to that. That travels right across all of these borders simply because these borders are mostly stories about "We own this, you own that. You are this." The stories are devices. Because they are stories, the only thing that is really holding us altogether as humanity and as the ecological world is the sensitivity to these natural attractions.

EP: To follow up on technology: What year did you first start using the Internet or online dialogs?

Michael Cohen: In 1992 or 1993, as soon as it came out, I [CHUCKLES]—actually the first time I think I was on the Internet was with Ralph Metzner at the second or third "Is the Earth a Living Organism" conference. They called them Gaia conferences. Mine was the original in 1985 with Jim Swann. He had the Internet on for the first time. "Here: You can talk to the world. You can write to the world about your experience with Gaia."

INTERVIEW

EP: Interesting. So this is tied into some of the Gaia work in the 1980s, and this is all connected to a sense of planetary consciousness and to technology—these are all synergistic developments.

Michael Cohen: I had this experience of knowing that the planet was alive in 1966, and in 1978 or 1979, Lovelock published the Gaia hypothesis. There I had validation of what I was already teaching for 18 years. I had friends who were in the field of geology and were writing books about this but being turned away continuously because [their work] made life a part of geology. I think it is more accepted now, but it was not then.

EP: So, it is all part of changing the story world to reflect people's experiences and also emerging understandings of natural systems. What has been really interesting in these *Ecopsychology* interviews is to touch on people's background, their family, childhood, and early experiences and how these may have contributed to their work as an adult. Is something that planted a seed that led to your future life direction?

EP: Well, I think what planted the seed in many ways was my parents being first-generation Americans and being Jewish and having come out of the pogroms in Russia. There was really a fear that a belief system could get you into trouble. The second thing was that Eleanor Roosevelt and Lewis Mumford in 1925 put together a Utopian Garden Community called "Sunnyside Gardens" in Queens, New York, about 15–20 min from Times Square. They owned it and set it up like little New England villages with lawns and common areas and gardens all over the place. My parents found value in that and moved there in 1928 and I was born there and I was raised, really, in this little garden in the middle of New York City. I knew the world that way and I did a lot of bonding to that, simply because that was what life was around me. In addition, my parents were part of the Settlement House Movement, and I grew up going into summer camps that were sponsored by the Settlement Houses in New York. So this close community was part of the way they lived.

Right through high school, I was almost living in a separate little world that we probably now [would call] something like "hippiedom without the drugs." It was held together by folk dancing and folk music that anybody could get into—contra dancing—because it was a community thing. My parents were teaching this. In explaining why she did this, Eleanor Roosevelt said, "If you take people away from nature, they lose their humanity." This was 1925. And there were people who agreed to that and therefore put this community together.

Another part was that, when I went to school, they made me write with my right hand, even though I was a "lefty." That threw me into temper tantrums and nail biting. . . I was getting a lot of grief, including my left hand always being blue because the inkwell was on the right side (you had to dip pens and cross over your work, smear your work, and get the ink all over you). So, in first grade I protested to the teachers. "Put the inkwells for left-handers on the left side of the desk and therefore we do not have to go through all of this and we can write with our left hand." "No. You are not allowed to write with your left hand." [LAUGHS] The inkwells were drilled into the desks! So, you could not move them if you wanted to! I suffered until the fourth grade. Then Waterman came out with the fountain pen and the teachers allowed me to write with my left hand and that was a huge difference.

I think about what my left-handedness has meant. I had a diversity that you find in 10%–15% of the population. You find diversity and differences everywhere—nature is never the same. My diversity was being prejudiced against and I was being put through hell. I think my life is still based on getting the world to move the inkwell for humanity so that we can be together with it rather than keep knocking it and—and I know from my own experience that the disorders that came out of this business of having a story about where the inkwell should be on the right side for the right-handed world, which saw the left-handed world as being something that was evil.

EP: These are such beautiful metaphors and stories. I am really enjoying our conversation. Everything that we are talking about is of a piece. Can you say a little bit more about the role of music in your life? I know because of your family background you were quite connected with the folk music movement. And as you say, it was really more than music; it was really a way of life and a worldview.

Michael Cohen: This music was not produced commercially and published. It was shared heart to heart, mouth to mouth, and therefore, it continually changed. There are stories that I have traced—you can see them century by century, family by family, district by district—changing, always changing to meet the needs of the people who were using them at the time. This is a whole different thing than hearing music recorded in one particular way, learning the recording, and being stuck with it. The folk music would get you away from that. These camps [I attended] were nonelectric and so there was not any recording—everything was handmade so to speak.

EP: That is a great story, too. Let me bring us to present day and the art and technology of movie *Avatar*. I noticed that you have

incorporated references to the movie in your writings. It seems to me that the movie characters' bio-spiritual connections to the planet Pandora mimic in many ways your beliefs about natural attractions. Could you speak to that?

Michael Cohen: Well, I think they represent what people hold somewhere in their hearts that is buried. So, I had mixed feelings about the film. Unfortunately, the film [takes place] on Pandora while we are actually sitting here on planet [Earth]. The problem with it is that people get satisfaction out of seeing that film but they are not doing the activities that allow [these connections] to happen here.

In one sense, the film is further addicting [people] to some story shown on a screen rather than to the real thing. I have been in workshops with folks who are using cardboard salmon to run around and demonstrate in some song what the salmon population is. Right outside their door the salmon are spawning. They are in the streams. [These people] are sitting on the 40-acre wildlife sanctuary. They never even get out of the building. And that is the dichotomy.

EP: I wonder if you could describe a short nature-connecting activity for the readers of this journal?

Michael Cohen: Well, [here is] one that is very popular and easy to do—if you understand what you are doing and even if you do not. Find a natural area that is attractive to you and something that is attractive in it (it is always based on this attraction kind of thing). Then you verbalize “I like, or I love this sound of the wind in the trees because . . .” You just say that you love it and you explain what it is that you love about it or why you love it. And then, you take that same sentence and you change it and you say, “I love myself because . . .” And you take the same thing you described, that sound of the wind, and describe yourself as it. And all of a sudden you find that what was attracting you to the wind is also part of you—and the wind says, “You are a beautiful expression of nature in contact with these trees.” And then all of a sudden, say, “I am a beautiful expression of nature in contact with trees. I never thought of myself that way. I do not even think I am beautiful.”

It tricks the story world into getting into nature and then looking at the story about self. Once people do that in my program, they then

write out what happened and they write to the folks in Antarctica about what happened. The folks in Antarctica write back to them when they do it. And then they exchange what they appreciated or learned from each other. And so you get the story world now bonded to what happened in nature and it includes, what you would have to call “our inner nature” or these natural senses. So, as long as you do the whole thing in a complete way, you then get nature in the literate and the nonliterate [worlds]. Then you sleep on that.

The next morning or 2 days later, with sleeping on it—when you are asleep and no longer defended by the story world—[what] I call the “old brain” crawls up these paths, embeds itself, and you wake up and all of a sudden those feelings are not as strong about some addiction or some story or belief as they were before. One: You know that you can get fulfillment from the sound of the wind rather than from the addiction, and two: because it makes sense in terms of recognizing yourself as part of nature. So, you get the sense of reason putting all this together, but the change actually takes place when you are sleeping—because then the defenses are not there. If you want to do this course, it is a nine-session course, and if you do not sleep one night between these activities, they are just going to jam up and the whole thing can become another intellectual thing, an *Avatar* film.

EP: Michael, I think that really helped describe your work and how it can be propagated internationally. It brings people together on a basic level, potentially across cultures and socioeconomic barriers. I want to thank you very much for sharing your wisdom with our readers today. I appreciate it.

Michael Cohen: Thanks for your interest. This is a big break.

—Interview by Thomas Joseph Doherty
Editor-in-Chief

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