

Ecology and Experience: Reflections From a Human Ecological Perspective

By Richard J. Borden

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This book is unique. It reads as several books in one, woven together by the author's personal and professional experience. It is a history of the discipline of human ecology, and at the same time it is Richard Borden's personal memoir and musings over the course of a long and rich career as an academic and human ecologist.

As Borden has spent the majority of his career at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine (which has one, and only one, major—Human Ecology), much of what he brings together in the discipline of human ecology and his personal memoirs take place against the backdrop of the college and his life there.

Drawing on the work of Joseph Campbell and Rollo May, Borden sets the tone for what is to come in the book, with a thoughtful discussion of the importance of myth and metaphor. Drawing on Campbell's (1990, p. 101) ideas that "Myths do not have to do with analyzing and scientifically discovering causes ... [but rather] ... Myth has to do with relating the human being to his [or her] environment," Borden makes the case that, while looking for causes can in some circumstances be a bona fide pursuit, it is in the end a limited enterprise. Rather, in a Zen-like way, the point is to appreciate and to engage with the environment.

In this sense, human ecology becomes part science, part art, and ultimately a spiritual (sans formal religion) venture. As Borden (p. xxi) puts it, "... the power of myth has always been told in the language of poets and artists, whose special gifts go further than what they consciously know."

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So it is in the prophetic spirit, or perhaps that of the *Rishi* of Vedic times, that Borden embarks on his reflexive journey to make sense of human ecology's (and his own) attempts to make sense of the world in which we live, and particularly humankind's long and complex relationship to it, and place in it.

After laying this foundation, Borden embarks on the main part of his book, which is divided into four sections: Transects and Plots, Facets of Life, Wider Points of View, and a final Coda.

The first section, Transects and Plots, is the most personal and unabashedly "least academic" part of the book. In it, he traces his own life journey from his earliest years, and how he first found the discipline of human ecology. Here, he looks at significant parts of human ecology's charisma as a discipline that drew him in the first place, and how he found himself in the discipline. He gives the existentialist Søren Kierkegaard's dictum (p. 70), for what is an emerging through-line of the book: "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced." Herein we see the importance of cognitive and humanist psychologists such as Ulric Neisser, Jean Piaget, Abraham Maslow, and Joseph Rychlak. As the young Richard Borden was making sense of the world, these were some of the thinkers he was reading and trying to make sense of.

Borden concludes his first section with a lengthy discussion of formal education, and how it has unfolded institutionally. He warns particularly of succumbing to what Whitehead (1929/1978) characterized as the "inert ideas" of received wisdom. The central problem of education thus becomes precisely that of keeping ideas alive and nurturing them in (academic and other) communities, without falling prey to this inertia.

In the section Facets of Life, Borden grapples with a number of issues of the life or death variety. He explores issues about life and death, time (local, but mostly geologic), and asks the deceptively simple question: "Where is the environment?"

He then ventures into the importance of context in the discipline of human ecology, and in living systems in general. Here, the limits of the sequestered laboratory become all too apparent. He concludes this section with thoughts on metaphor and meaning. He makes his vision clear throughout that the discipline is not just an objective one, with measurable and rationalized ways of seeing. It is a deeply personal one.

Borden launches the section Wider Points of View with a quote from Marcuse that "Wholeness demands its own rigor." That rigor is not born of yet more precise instruments and elaborate mathematical equations. Rather, it is a rigor of thought, of insight, of perception. This book in general, and this section in particular, is at least partly a manifesto for the Human Ecological Imagination,

and its obsession (my words here, not Borden's, but I do think they speak to what he is about) with relating the parts back to the whole, and never falling into the seductive trap of thinking that analysis, however rigorous, is ever sufficient without the synthesis that follows.

Borden is an advocate of multidisciplinary approaches, because of their ability to encourage students and citizens of the world to see that world through a variety of lenses. This leads to a final chapter on the unfinished course, and some possible scenarios for education and human ecology in the years ahead.

Not unlike the coda of a well-orchestrated symphony, the Coda here recounts and crystallizes the central ideas from earlier in the book. He is alone at the end of Eagle Lake in Acadia National Park, musing on the meaning of life and death. He concludes (p. 398) with a touching quote from his dear Patricia. He is prepared to go "back into the soup." "I am prepared to meet it as a homecoming. Everything else is mystery."

This book flows from the life work of someone with maturity and wisdom. It could not have been written by a young person, nor by someone who had not done a great deal of study, introspection, and meditating on the world and his and humankind's place in it. The opening of this review bears repeating here—this is a unique book. The reader cannot escape being touched by it, moved deeply.

References

- Campbell, J. (1990). *Transformations of myth through time*. New York: Perennial Library.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1929/1978). *Process and reality*. New York: Free Press.

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