

The “Other” as Kin: Reflecting on Integral Ecology

by Mike Schut, Integral Ecology Director

Integral ecology: it doesn't quite roll off the tongue. When I share my job title, most people cock their head and look at me a bit quizzically. I suppose we could blame Pope Francis, though I would argue that we rather owe him our thanks for popularizing the term in his 2015 environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. And rather than describe the term theologically or argue about its meaning, I would like to instead briefly share three stories that I think point us toward integral ecology's essence.

Spring Lake Ranch About a mile up a gravel road whose every contour I still remember lies Spring Lake Ranch, a community committed to walking alongside those with significant mental health challenges.

The ranch is nestled in the green mountains of Vermont, 11 miles south of Rutland where I was born. My dad worked there. He led work crews: gardening, maple sugaring, animal husbandry, wood chopping—turns out that working outside together helps people heal.

My family and I lived at the ranch—meaning some neighbors were suffering with significant mental illnesses and others were my dad's colleagues. But I don't remember distinguishing between the two. Perhaps I would have had I lived there beyond my first eight years, but the ranch treated everyone with respect and compassion and did not “other” those with mental health challenges.

Samaritan Inns After graduating from college with a BS in biology I moved to Washington, DC, to serve as a resident manager of a home for ten formerly unhoused men. I lived and built community with those men, most of whom were at least twice my age, of another race, from the city, and had been homeless; many struggled with substance use disorders. Being an authority figure there was foolhardy, I suppose.

But Samaritan Inns had been started by Church of the Savior, an alternative model of what church is all about. And I wanted to experience a church like that—it seemed like the kind of community where Jesus would hang out, in part because he moved toward those his culture deemed “other” or unacceptable.

Wolves I moved west after my time in DC, to the University of Oregon to study for an MS in Environmental Studies. One afternoon my roommate walked into our living room to tell me that the governor of Alaska had signed an order allowing hunters to round up wolves with helicopters—to kill them more efficiently. All to attract more deer and elk hunters. All to attract more money. I first felt disbelief, then waves of anger, and then deep sorrow as I walked outside, sat on the deck, and watched my tears fall on the summer grass.

Integral Ecology I started working with the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls in October of 2024 as Director of Integral Ecology. I am not always sure myself how to describe what the job entails. But these three stories provide a glimpse into the heart of integral ecology: to see that we are more connected than separate. That those society might deem as “other”—whether the unhoused or a pack of wolves or those with mental health challenges—are not in reality “other,” but kin. That experiences of kinship reveal something deeply true about the nature of reality.

When kinship is felt, when the reality of being in relationship with the “other” is the ground on which we stand, then working toward a society where no one and nothing in creation is othered flows from our being. Indeed, in each of the three stories above, the recognition of kinship led to action: whether joining a letter-writing campaign to the governor of Alaska or helping to create a home for the unhoused.

Said another way, one of the tasks of integral ecology is to embody kinship through acts of compassion—housing the unhoused, say—and acts of justice—lobbying for policies to increase affordable housing, for example.

In my first few months here, we have provided opportunities for the sisters and Associates to advocate for clean water, to weigh in on policies to support the unhoused in St. Cloud, and to vote for the continuation of Minnesota state lottery funding to improve parks and protect wildlife habitat.

In an integrated world, all these actions belong, cohere, and make sense—because, as Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, “The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are the same cry. Everything is interconnected.”

Editor’s note: the integral ecology position used to be called “justice, peace, and integrity of creation,” but was renamed following the release of *Laudato Si'*.