

New Woman

FAKE A TERRIFIC TAN

May 1995

**"He
Was
My
Best
Friend...
And
Then
I Slept
With
Him"**

**Unsolicited Opinions
From MERRILL MARKOE**

BAD GUYS

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THE earth's IN OUR BLOOD



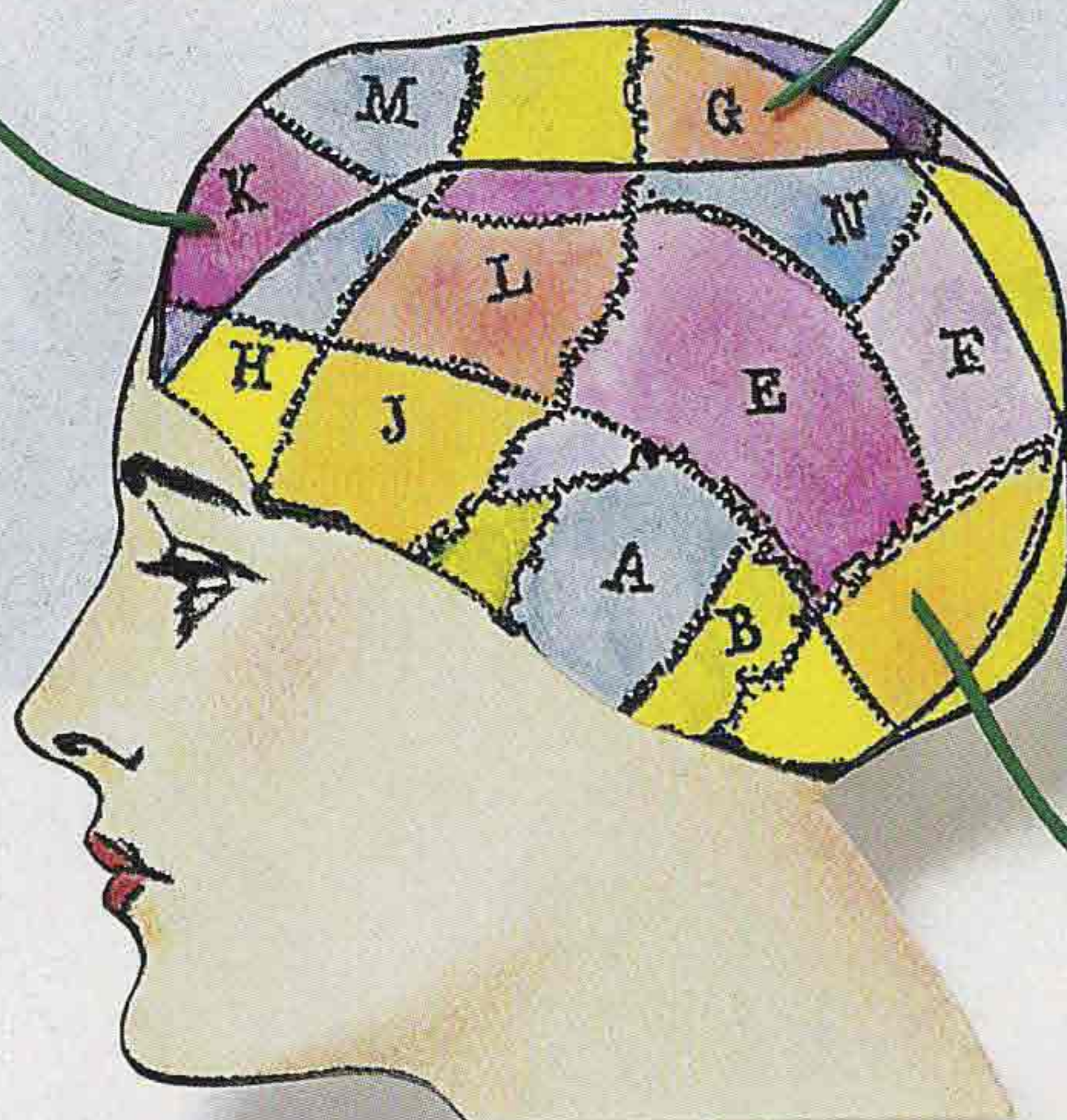
I have a friend who is always attuned to the weather and the sky. When she says, "What a beautiful day it's been!" or "Did you see that moon last night?" I look up, startled to realize I've been so narrowly absorbed in my string of activities that I haven't really noticed. And I'm not alone. As our daily surroundings become more synthetic, we rush to work in cars or trains to spend our days in sealed, climate-controlled boxes. With our senses numbed by a daily barrage of noises and images, few of us deem it crucial to watch the shape of the clouds or finger a leaf.

But a new field of psychology—ecopsychology—attributes some of our daily stress to our disconnection from the natural world. Its proponents are redefining mental health to include a harmonious, respectful relationship with nature.

We all have a deep, inherent identification with the planet, what cultural historian Theodore Roszak, Ph.D., author of *Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*, calls an "ecological unconscious." As a result, we prefer the smell of moist earth to car exhaust, the sound of the sea to ringing telephones. In the absence of contact with the natural world, we lose our sense of belonging to a larger whole and, therefore, our sense of meaning.

Studies show that even limited exposure to nature can profoundly influence our happiness, health, and productivity. Rachel Kaplan, Ph.D., a professor of environmental psychology at the University of Michigan, for instance, studied workers' job satisfaction and found that employees with a view of greenery from their offices experienced less job pressure and fewer symptoms of

illness than their co-workers with no natural view. And in health care, Bernadine Cimprich, Ph.D., an assistant professor of nursing at the University of Michigan, found that women recovering from breast cancer surgery fared better when they were closer to nature. In her study, patients were divided into two groups. Those involved in a nature



activity three times a week for 90 days complained much less of mental fatigue or inability to cope. Compared with the control group, their cognitive acuity was measurably sharper, they were more likely to return to work full-time, and were more game for new endeavors, like losing weight or learning to play an instrument.

The natural world can also be a powerful vehicle for insight, as Steven Harper, a wilderness guide in Big Sur, California, relates in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (an anthology released by Sierra Club Books this month). A computer programmer who joined one of his treks arrived outfitted with the latest in high-tech camping gear. So that he would be less insulated from the outdoors, Harper encouraged him to travel more simply, with limited success. A few days into the trip, the group finally persuaded this man to come out of his cocoon-shaped tent and sleep under the stars. That night



marked a shift. When he awoke the next morning, he shared his delight at watching the moon travel the night sky and began to realize that his work life in the company of machines was void of living things. He then began to relate more to other members of the group and to feel enlivened by sensing the complex textures, sounds, and smells around him.

Clearly, recognizing our link to nature has broad implications for the environmental movement. One of ecopsychology's goals is to redefine environmental abuse as an offense to the community. "We could take an environmental threat," says Roszak, "like the destruction of an old-growth forest, go into a court of law, and argue that it is an assault on the mental health of a region, a neighborhood, or the

children of the human species. For that reason, it's got to stop." Lawyers have said that they can make such a case.

Will such far-reaching changes come in time to save us? No one knows. But if we can't avert global disaster, at least we can find deeper satisfactions than those found in shopping and watching TV. Attending to the earth's balance is essential, not just because we'll have nowhere nice to go on vacation, but because destroying ecosystems is comparable to burning down our own homes. When a distant rainforest is ravaged, we have less air to breathe. And savoring nature's gifts—whether it's listening to the ceaseless motion of a brook or observing the complexity of a flower—can restore our perspective and help us feel more fully alive.

For more information, subscribe to the *Ecopsychology Newsletter*, Box 7487, Berkeley, CA 94707, for \$10 a year.



new thinking

where the wild things grow

Reconnecting with nature doesn't have to involve a trip to some remote, dramatic landscape. You can simply take a walk in the park or get to know the trees on your block. Here are a range of ideas and programs for spending time out in the wild or not-so-wild.

local

Local hiking, biking, and running clubs as well as museums, parks, and botanical gardens often sponsor outings. And the Sierra Club's regional chapters run hikes in your own area—sometimes free of charge.

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