

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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This month we welcome Dr. Peter Whitehouse as he shares with us his work as the Tree Doctor and Eco-Social Reconstruction...

### Beyond Social Construction to Eco-Social Reconstruction



By Peter Whitehouse, M.D.

It was a little daunting for me to walk into the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies dressed as a tree claiming to have healing powers. Yet on the occasion of a global health innovation conference being held there in early April, 2018, I packed up my costume and spent four days on campus, partially dressed as a tree.

Now I wasn't dressed in my full tree costume - no leaves, no mask and not even my forest green stethoscope. However, I did wear one of my ties depicting trees and under my dress shirt wore my favorite t-shirt, which portrays an oak tree with a Yin and Yang symbol embedded in its branches.

At this point you may be asking, what does my tree persona have to do with social construction? To answer, I would suggest that the Tree Dr. character is itself a social construction in a domain lying between art and science. Trees can be viewed as the lungs of the planet, and certainly they contribute to biological health in many ways. However, these biological creatures also have a hidden life under the ground and process information over time periods that are longer than our lifespans. Forests are also important in the evolution of our own civilizations as sources of natural products and of stories.

My Tree Dr. is named Sylvanus, the Roman God of both forests and fields, and the boundaries between them has taught me quite a bit about social construction. One book that I have found influential is anthropologist Eduardo Kohn's *How forests think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Forests don't use words although they do communicate with chemicals and inspire indigenous peoples who live intimately with them to think in different ways than we westerners in human verbal communication do.

I began to wonder whether we human beings should be wary about being too human centric. I think we need to go beyond our human community to again honor our relationships with nature. In doing that I invented a new term called Eco-Social Reconstruction. All constructions are made of ongoing processes of deconstruction and reconstruction, but almost always in relationship to other living creatures; I believe that perhaps we need to take social construction to a new ecosystem level that will help civilization survive and nature to flourish because of, instead of in spite of us. We need to partner with our fellow trees.

Resources:

Gergen M and Gergen K, *Playing with Purpose: Adventures in Performative Social Science* (Writing Lives)

Gergen K, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*