

ECOPSYCHOLOGY: HEALTH AND COMMUNITY

The voice of the earth.

Following the Earth Summit, held in Rio in 1992, Theodore Roszak published a book entitled 'the Voice of the Earth'. In this book he defined for the first time the term 'ecopsychology', exploring the links between the human mind and the living planet which gave us birth and feeds us. He speaks of the connections between the earth, the natural environment, all living things and the mental health, well-being and peace of mind of the people who dwell among them. He also tells of the links between the health of all human beings and that of the biosphere.

Ecopsychology proposes that repression of the 'ecological unconscious' is the deepest root of the madness inherent in western industrial society. The ecological unconscious is at the centre of the human mind, within which lies a record of the entire history of the evolution of the world. We all come from the same place: everything that has ever lived continues to live through us.

So we need to reawaken the collective sense of reciprocity between all parts of the natural world, and to heal the fundamental alienation between humanity and the earth. Most importantly, we must recognise again our ethical responsibility towards our planet and towards all others.

"If the earth suffers, we suffer with her".

Since 1992, the destruction of the planet earth has intensified, while at the same time there has been an enormous increase in the incidence of mental illness. The connection is our despair in the face of the current ecological and political crisis. In our hearts we know that unless we take action there will be no future, but, in the midst of so much violence and so much isolation, it is hard for us to recognise our own power. In the towns and cities we have no contact with the wilderness in which lies the only reality. We are isolated from the natural world by concrete and steel, depression is becoming the second most common cause of death, and physical illness often arises through mental distress.

"The earth doesn't belong to us, we belong to the earth".

Another world is possible; there is another way. The modern western model of 'representative democracy' threatens to destroy the remnants of the collective way of life enjoyed by traditional communities, but in indigenous Latin America a very 'otherly' way of life still survives, based on a very different tradition: in fact some of the original peoples still live according to the ecopsychological principles described above.

There are three fundamental differences between indigenous ways of thinking and those of modern western society. The first is the indigenous concept of harmony between people and the land. They teach us to listen to mother earth, to the totality, that everything is alive, that everything has a heart, that all is cyclical, in our end is our beginning. This sums up the difference between the western world and that of 'the other', of people who live in a different reality, of dreams and myths.

The second contrast is the difference between western individualism, which pollutes every part of life, and the sense of community and of the collective experienced by original peoples,

for whom everyone is part of the whole, trying to work towards the common good of the whole community, without the exclusion of any person or group. ‘Life is only possible collectively’.

Finally, the third point is that of a totally different relation to power. In contrast to the western model of representative democracy, the indigenous have a form of direct community democracy with the participation of all. There is a rotation of authority, with total accountability and sense of responsibility. In many indigenous communities the idea of consensus survives, achieved by the participation of everyone in assemblies, where no one is excluded, and a reasoned dialogue is held between all members of the community. Power is held to account. The motto is ‘governing by obeying’: the people command, and the government obeys. One example of this system is that the normal method of punishment is for the culprit to work for the benefit of the entire community, so as to restore the equilibrium of the world.

“Looking after each other to keep ourselves well”

“Healthcare should not be treated as a commodity to be bought and sold, it is a fundamental right of every human being. A government which is incapable of giving everyone work, food, education and healthcare does not have the right to govern”.

The original peoples of Latin America often do not have access to hospitals, so they need to continue to improve their own community healthcare systems to tackle curable illnesses even though they are short of resources. Above all, they have a collective system, focusing on preventative healthcare for all the people who need it. The priority is to keep well and face any problems together. So the first principle of community healthcare is to keep themselves well by looking after each other. Those who work in healthcare are called ‘health promoters’ and receive no salary. Their work is a duty and an honour, and they are fed and housed by the community. There is no distinction made between general healthcare and mental healthcare – the two go together.

Nevertheless, they need to survive in the midst of killings, assaults, displacement, torture, threats and all the other serious events which result from the constant attacks made against indigenous peoples throughout the long night of their history. The indigenous peoples say that if the mental health of their community is good, it helps them to remain united, to work together and organise, to build co-operation. “This is how the community becomes the most important support for the person. The best medicine for mental illness is the community”.

These words sum up the difference: in the modern western world there is no community. Cases of mental illness are growing explosively. The health promoters say “if a wound in the heart can be experienced collectively, the way to heal it can also be collective. If we support each other in the community, we can resolve our problems more easily. Forgiveness is the way to transform hatred into love”.

It is already here

In previous years, we struggled for a more just society, now it is a question of a struggle for the survival of humanity. We have seen that there are two fundamental principles: the form of community organisation inherent in indigenous culture, and their love of nature, of the *Pachamama*. A community-based way of life, striving towards the common good, based on the principles of reciprocity, duty and responsibility, is found in societies founded in the need for communal work, such as farming or stock-keeping communities. Here, a communal way of life survives, because collectively working the land leads to co-operation, mutual aid and shared decisions. Closeness to the earth, and to all living things that grow and flourish, leads to a more natural way of life. Above all these communities retain the dignity of being in

resistance against the plundering of the natural world and the desecration of the mother earth. So another world is not only possible, it is already here, though small and under threat.

“We struggle in order to speak out against forgetting, against death, for memory and for life”

The endless wars, the fears created to keep us quiet, the millions who now cry in the night, those to whom day is denied, for whom death is a gift, to whom life is forbidden: we need to take action now. It is still possible to put an end to the destruction of our mother earth and to make the world anew. But there is not much time left.