

Nature as third environment and the intelligent body

Action research by Rosa dei Venti (The Rose Wind) Luca Mingarelli's T.C. which is located in Casnate con Besnate (Como province)-December 2010 .

“How may an ecologically sustainable civilization turn out to be a desirable outcome ?”

A. Langer

This article is an excerpt from some parts of chapters 4 and 6 of the following book written by myself : *“Difficult adolescences: autobiography of a T.C. for teenagers “*, published by Ananke Italy 2010.

I wish to share my thoughts with readers concerning the following issues : how did we provide space and a key role for some innovative therapeutic approaches such as Nature and the intelligent body in our “Proactive T.C.” action research model alongside the traditional therapeutic systems of our Rosa dei Venti T.C., which are dealt with in the other chapters of the book .

Nature as a third environment

I do remember my childhood ; my memory is a container which holds a wide array of images and anecdotes concerning my encounters with nature . My parents took me on holiday to various locations in a natural setting ; these places were so beautiful and so different from each other, that I still retain the images and my lived experiences expressed as feelings to the present day .

As far as the way in which my outlook on nature as a teacher and a “healer “ was constituted I went through a particularly crucial experience being first a trainee and then a trainer/consultant in the Casa di Cenci laboratory house, a rural home in Umbria . Research within this context is actually linked to the Movement for Co-operative Education : M.C.E. This movement which concerns itself with educational research arose from the thoughts and experiences of C. Freinet ; my lived experiences within that setting were deeply stimulating for me as well as giving rise to a host of questions concerning the lack of natural settings in our lives and our schools ; not to mention the potential and the crucial factors linked with the following issue : re-establishing a direct relationship with nature .

I always believed throughout the life of the Rose of Wind T.C. that the encounter with nature is one of the crucial challenges as well as being one of the key components to be associated with the complex therapeutic process . This does not imply that as much nature as possible should be the overriding concern ; rather, the focus should lie on *a continuing relationship with nature and its lived experiences* .

Awareness of the power and freedom of nature is to be attained : experiencing an encounter with nature may foster and complete the therapeutic process within the setting of the TC whilst going hand in hand with and completing therapy, art, and education .

Human beings lived so long side by side with such figments of their imagination, with such yearnings all facets of nature could be exploited, mastered, forced to yield profits . It is high time to realize that mankind is but a part of the world ; therefore one can't help feeling closeness and friendship as far as nature and other people are concerned .

Therefore, *nature plays a key role in the therapeutic process* as far as our theoretical postulates and our lived experiences within the setting of a TC for adolescents are concerned . I perceive nature as a wise open book which is both straightforward and hard to grasp ; furthermore, a book one may read for free and that is always within reach : I actually see nature as something we are not used to read any more , as an untapped resource .

Nature holds some qualities , which the teenagers who are our guests in the TC didn't have the chance to internalize in their tangled lives prior to admission to the TC . For instance, one could mention rhythm and repetition : often our guests come into the TC carrying some rather dysfunctional everyday life rhythms which lack any meaningful and logical structure . These teenagers are used to stay awake all night , whereas they sleep through the day . These adolescents wish to perform tasks in a haphazard fashion as opposed to doing this at appropriate times whereas they resent the repetition of any necessary, required course of action , which may be needed to live together in a TC .

Therefore, it is both very much needed and a difficult and complex task : to reawaken dormant skills linked with carefully observing, and exploring nature and life : i.e. observation skills closely intertwined with listening skills : This implies : being able to recognize and establish a connection between facets which happen to be both distinct and quite separate to draw conclusions . This does remind one a little of “Our ancestors who knew to be ever so skilful at doing this : in reading into the movement of celestial bodies in the sky for orienteering in space as well bringing order into time and interpreting signs and trails one could find on the ground (F.Lorenzoni . “Con il cielo negli occhi (Carrying the sky in our eyes)

To sum it up nature as a therapeutic tool in a TC provides a *container, a context and the chance to garner e learning experiences* . Nature constantly undergoes unforeseeable changes in its colours , its smells, and its weather-related factors : it is quite worlds apart from the commonplace psychotherapy setting where the background is as “neutral” as can be and also happens to lack stimuli .

Nature, seen as a therapeutic environment , constantly requires adaptation efforts ; it call for the senses and the body to stay awake and alert ; it demands efforts and commitment as well as creating the conditions to experience powerful primary emotions such as fear, anxiety, and bewilderment .

Offering a working environment in a natural setting within the whole group or just some of the guests (A smaller group comprising 3 persons ; as opposed to having all 8 of the TC's guests) has always been a main feature of our interdisciplinary approach .

Over time, such work has been led both by individual, and pairs of, Mental Health Professionals by both internal and external consultants .

A mountain hut in the area has been the chosen venue for regular monthly meetings during a certain time frame implying stays lasting from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 5 days as well as overnight stays . Movement therapy and art therapy in a natural setting : a location we went back to on a regular basis aiming towards letting the boys and girls experience their own personal creative process as well as group dynamics and its limits taking bodily and artistic experiences as a starting point by contrast, in different circumstances with other Mental Health Professionals , we actually employed different settings each time according to the needs and the projects of persons taking part . It went all the way from climbing down into caves in their uterine form which stood for the maternal womb in a regressive experience, to going up a stream or an icy waterfall, to climbing faces of rock as a study on verticality, to sledge dog races on snow, to canoeing on a river , managing and adapting oneself to sleep in tents, huts or campsites as well as learning how to light a fire, and cook food on a camp fire .

Living in nature certainly takes place in circumstances which are both challenging and unusual for a teenager (This often also applies to adults) who maybe only previously met nature in some public park in a city : once one our teenage guest who saw a cow grazing in a field actually asked : "Do sheep have horns then ?"

I was able to put my notions to the test : the power and the very strength of nature acted as a container for some omnipotent and deviant aspects pertaining to the personalities of some of the teenage guests who actually achieved the following : they were able to display both their frailty and their limits by coming to terms with nature with such a clash/encounter, as well as acknowledging these issues ; moreover, the movement processes at both the group as a whole and the individual level which have been so blatantly underscored in lived experiences in a natural setting are both discussed and assessed /internalized : this takes place both straight away during the experiences within natural settings themselves and subsequently during further meetings and workshops in the TC .

Preparing the trip beforehand is a key factor for these natural activities for both the group and individual guests: this actually implies getting one's haversack ready as well as studying maps and planning the relevant route ; moreover the whole group must take decisions as well as choosing essential personal belongings to be taken on the trip, whereas the total load is to be kept in bounds ; moreover everyone brings something useful for him/her, and for the group as a whole, such as food or the relevant camping kit and such choices give rise to conflicts as well as fostering teamwork ; furthermore, the differences of the distinct genders of man and woman are treated with respect therefore, for instance, female individuals have to carry less weight than males .

During the trip in a natural setting participants find that they have to learn to find their way across the territory they are exploring: this implies using a compass , as well as observing the sky both by day and by night whilst finding the necessary bearings, which, from a physical point of view , actually coincide with the cardinal points (The Wind Rose itself) .

Walking is the basic movement process during such trips (although other modes of movement such as canoes and sledge dogs or bicycles and donkeys are also used) ; even if different consultants did happen to add other bodily activities and modes of expression to complete the experience (theatre, music and so forth) : *walking*, which has been an indispensable primary activity for human beings since the days of Homo Erectus, actually requires commitment and effort and allows participants to move between different locations as well as accomplishing their project pertaining to the trip in a natural setting and reaching the destinations which have been agreed upon ; moreover, such experiences actually generate the need and the necessary requirements to walk in order to reach the planned target : a hut, or even water...

It often happens that someone does not want to go any further : therefore in such cases the group steps in and successfully unblocks the situation in most cases, it is possible to both explore and discuss typical leadership and fellowship dynamics within the relevant group in order to foster the development of trust, teamwork and competition as well understanding the identity and the typical behaviour and modes of expression of the group itself .

Sometimes participants actually met farmers or shepherds during the trip: such people conveyed unexpected lessons concerning honest and simple communication both to our teenagers, and to persons coming with them .

Nature compels one to come to terms with a constant streak of untoward events like sudden showers or snowstorms, a path cut off by a landslide or a tree trunk and so forth: from this point of view I actually perceive nature as a useful, constantly available free crash course in handling unexpected situations .

The mainstay of offering experiences in a natural setting is thus giving teenagers staying in the T.C. the chance to inhabit a third environment which is untainted by all the memories, relationships, wishes and emotional experiences which have marked the teenagers' life stories, which in turn have often been steeped in tragedy, or all the emotional factors that have been linked with their stay in the TC ; therefore lived experiences in a natural environment are added to and actually stand alongside their life with their relatives and their stay in the TC seen as a home . The dichotomy between their original home and the TC often breeds conflict and competition since one home is perceived as better than the other abode; the adolescents are sometimes homesick which is fair enough, moreover, sometimes the TC is charged with negative connotations, whereas other times the therapeutic community is actually idealized ; therefore a *third external environment* stands between the two dwelling places: this other place is course Nature which actually plays the role of a more neutral background where everyday activities, particularly focusing and underscoring modes of expression, art, and movement processes, may smooth the way for the removal of the parental home-TC dichotomy .

Our “*active TC in a natural setting*” has been exploring and structuring action and activities within a Therapeutic Education context by using each of the four natural elements, sometimes as a topic and other times as a metaphor : water, air, earth, and fire ; the relevant projects have both linked and involved all the various players, all the TC’ s members, both adolescents Mental Health Professionals, Therapists, and Educational Specialists within seasonal time frames .

Let me quote an example of how the natural elements project was carried out a few years ago, during nine months a decision was taken together (by resident teenagers and Mental Health Professionals) concerning the topic/metaphor “water as well as developing a series of activities and workshops such as : water photography, artistic activities with water’s colours, myths and tales about water from our cultural context and other cultures, building a pond with a fountain in the TC’ s garden, visiting the aquarium in Genua, water music, songs, and sounds ; this also comprised informative encounters and discussion about environmentally aware water use, trips to the swimming pool, visiting a spa, collecting water to be drunk at meals from local sources, exploring Lambro river which happened to flow a stone’s throw from the TC, which at the time was located in Erba , as well as running round Lake Segrino (a small Prealpine lake near the TC), and barbecues together with nightly swims off small Como Lake beaches .

Another example of active TC in a natural setting is the following experience : managing and tending an orchard and a garden: the TC teenager, who left to his devices tends to want everything right away on a silver platter , and who still lacks patience as a skill, comes to terms with the fact that one has to wait and make an effort, in order to obtain a product , be it of an aesthetic or culinary nature as well as learning how to let time run its course , and to wait till seeds which are to be sown and tended on a regular basis actually grow .

I thus deem that it is important to underscore to what extent nature includes and meets basic formative, educational, aesthetic, and therapeutic needs ; it is actually the very opposite of what our cultural context pushily swamps us with i.e. the cutting-edge technology virtual world of technology our culture also desensitizes feelings, bodies and thoughts as well as holding aesthetic feelings in check; therefore I think that addressing this lack and meeting these needs is actually a worthwhile bet which may offer the chance of a suitable and feasible learning curve for adolescents in generally and particularly for teenagers residing in the TC within a certain time frame as well as for the Therapeutic Community as a whole .

I do see a similarity of expression modes between nature, and its jumbled biodiversity , while it remains ever changing and beautiful at the same time and the teenager with his/her fiery untidy mass and host of unruly feelings, yearnings and thoughts, coupled with adolescence’s deep bodily changes ; I am persuaded that such similarities and factors mirroring each other, despite the distinct modes of expression, may actually provide stimuli and smooth the path to personal development in the TC for individuals (the same applies for the group as a whole) .

In today’s world as we are regrettably so often facing an increasing spate of traumatic natural disasters (not to mention social upheavals), I believe that within the

TC we do have the chance to question the following : if and how we should relate to such catastrophes as opposed to just being overwhelmed by them or actually turning a blind eye to these events ...

Rediscovering a direct relationship with nature as well as with cycles ruling life in the cosmos, may thus mean granting a little breathing space to teenagers residing in the TC, who can't stand being "locked up" in the Therapeutic community as if it was a prison, whereas mental Health Professionals actually raise hackle when they try and take the teenagers out for an encounter with nature, the adolescents rather ask to be brought to some shopping centre to eat a hamburger !

Some thoughts on *bodily intelligence*

Ongoing action research and an "active T.C." includes studies focusing on the following : how the body may often be a forgotten, neglected resource .

The body in formative and health care contexts is often discussed as if it was some cold, abstract, and remote entity : a body one seldom pays attention to . Such a body is a no-go area ; it is not able to express the potential ensconced in its language, and its intelligence .

From my standpoint, our body's social use expresses the cultural context; to be used differently it would have to break free from social models, and their patterns and processes . The body as a symbolical construct : a signifier around which an array of social and cultural facts is structured .

One should focus on the following issue : which relational and emotional consequences are generated by bodily interactions within the context of TC experiences ?

Each everyday life action is actually sifted by the emotional filter, which in turn is linked to somatic events, registered by our bodily memory at the subconscious level . *Emotions actually use the body as a stage* : if a "recharge" at the emotional and bodily levels is lacking, the whole process is limited to cognitive, behavioural and rational data assimilation solely in the wake of fast-forwarded events which have thus not yet been taken in and internalized .

For example, in the extraordinary event of birth, body-mind-feelings-environment integration occurs, a "state of grace" we lose over time .

I believe in a notion of the body that encompasses the relationship between body and psyche, body and action, body and feeling, life and knowledge : an idea of the body, as one of the forgotten realms, which is nonetheless useful for living and for "the active TC".

In the TC one also helps resident adolescents to retrace their body's life story, as well as correlations to one's psyche and feelings : an adolescent's body is per se a body undergoing sweeping changes and transformations, whereas awareness of any boundaries is lacking, moreover, adolescents entering the T.C. often bring a deprived an abused body, a body which has not been taken care of !

Generally speaking, body image shifts with our age, our role, and the tasks society entrusts us with . Posture and postural attitudes play a key role in moulding Self-

image . There is a binding force holding different factors together, which plays a key role, the experience linked with a particular kind of pleasure : the “pleasure of being taken as a part of the whole” which matches the notion of narcissistic pleasure in psychodynamic psychology .

Our action –research within the TC thus tends to focus both on knowledge and lived experiences, on body and feelings together with thought .

I have often realized working *in an active TC* that studying what lies closest to us, i.e. the body may actually smooth the way for learning processes and knowledge of the outside world to clarify this notion I would say, figuratively speaking, that if you are well acquainted with your home , you may move about and go out and venture on a journey towards the unknown being aware that you may always come back to a well-known place .

The process of offering movement therapy in the TC requires persons attending (this applies to Educational Specialists, Mental Health Professionals, and resident teenagers) to actively apply themselves to skills such as *listening skills, adaptation in interpersonal skills, as well as adaptation to the environment* .

Within the context of such an educational offer it is very much worthwhile to encourage an encounter with repetitive processes “Try, and try again”, to quote Galileo Galilei, which we do believe play a key role in the formative, educational, and therapeutic process .

The primary need to communicate starts from the body, and is in agreement / linked with the environment .

The targeted work and the leading role required of the staff are the following : to try and steep the whole day in the TC in sensorial presence and body awareness as well as doing the same with the various everyday activities .

I was able to observe how both Mental Health Professionals and patients often mainly lean towards, or even display a bias towards rationalizing thought processes ; therefore I deem that we should reemphasise an *intelligent body mindset* , meant as a learning and personal development tool as well as a vehicle for therapy in the TC which should be integrated with more traditional therapeutic processes .

Here are the following examples of integration of these different facets : for instance, activities in the TC involving bodily mediation may actually be put forward during team meetings (weekly encounter between educational Specialists and therapists), during which participants are sometimes asked to be able to spot the different postural attitudes in evidence as a teenager is being discussed during a meeting (thus discovering that such postures tell us something about that adolescent and his/her emotional and behavioural state), or to observe emotional responses stemming from sensorial bodily experiences, or activities which are proposed on various occasions ; moreover , to foster this *intelligent body outlook, as well as an outlook emphasising active and alert senses*, trainers with relevant skills and experience from various parts of the world are invited on a regular basis (this topic will be expanded on in the *training* section in an other chapter of the book) .

Besides action research dealing with *the intelligent body* other specific and innovative vehicles which are typical for our Rosa dei Venti TC are the following : *imagination, memory, life story and ritual actions* .

It is common knowledge that metaphoric language, from a psychophysiological point of view, activates the right hemisphere and is thus directly linked with the subconscious : telling tales; and structuring stories and contexts, listening to stories and myths stemming from our cultural context and other cultures, using integratory backgrounds and ritual actions : all this means an incredibly enriching learning opportunity for the TC as well as the chance to establish integration between different levels such as the conscious and the subconscious, mind, body and emotions,

I do think that ritualised actions within the TC context may be considered part of the therapeutic process in conjunction with their aesthetic and formative value .

For instance the following may count as ritual actions : an adolescent newcomer to the TC being offered a cup of tea, a soft drink as an aperitif and/or something to eat which has been prepared in a particularly careful and painstaking manner, or an adolescent speaking during a teenager assembly holding a stick or another object chosen each time during his whole speech, or also the gift given by the Mental Health Professionals when a teenager leaves the TC, having finished his/her temporary stay within the TC ; or, furthermore, the signature pertaining to his/her project, which is also co-signed by the Educational Specialist he is assigned to each time there is co-operation in setting up the project, or the relevant project is modified or brought up to date together ; other further examples are the action of taking medication within the context of pharmacological treatment, which always takes place in the same place at the same time, so it may acquire *relational value*, the weekly meeting between the resident teenager and the educational specialist he has been assigned to which may take place outside the TC itself (for example in a nice bar ...), or walking in the park in the small town, or even other events ; a ritual action performed with awareness, which has been thought through by the group as a whole, may become a useful vehicle to achieve the aims of the personal development of adolescents within the TC and this also applies to the TC taken as a whole .

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