

# PSYCHOLOGICAL RECYCLING

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The principles that govern our efforts to leave a healthy Earth for our descendants also apply to our personal growth. Each human being is an interdependent and delicate ecological system, loaded with waste, even with those of previous generations. This "psychological garbage", if scattered, can also damage our environment and that of future generations.

Many times it is only with the passing of the years when we realize that something has actually been toxic, and, even after realizing it, it can be arduous to identify it as the source of our problems. For example, many people seek changes in their lives, but do not feel able to carry them out. They find it hard to express what they feel, their emotions disagree with their ideas or suffer from prolonged personal dissatisfaction that may torment them only in their dreams, but can also contaminate their daily lives. Others experience gaps in their personal history or do not know how to interpret the signals of their body.

## *The origin of the problems*

From my double position of psychotherapist and ecologist I am surprised how people who accept the idea that the signs of deterioration of any ecological system are inexplicable if the context and the background are not taken into account, may still think that our personal problems have nothing to do with our social and psychological heritage. However, the same people manifest in their personal relationships, for example in couple conflicts, mechanisms that have nothing to do with the here and now. Where the burden of the waste of our personal history is most noticeable is in our relationship with children. No matter how much we make them responsible for "not leaving us in peace", we the adults are the ones who unconsciously repeat what was done to us as children, although we at that time promised that when we become big we would never do the same to the little ones.

All this usually gives the vague feeling that, although we have forgotten and betrayed our inner child, it is hard for us to be adults. These signs indicate that it is time to open the container of our own history and pay attention to our bodily and unconscious reactions to it. Assuming it allows us to live our emotional life as adults and, at the same time, not harm other people.

Of course, not everything is garbage in the inheritance of a person, but it does the same thing as physical waste: piled up unreflectively form a set that, in the long run, endangers the flow of life. However, a large part of the same ingredients, separated and recycled in a conscious way, could become very valuable resources.

The Swedish company Sellbergs, one of the most prestigious recycling companies in the world, proposes six levels to give each waste the treatment it needs.

- Reuse
- Recycle
- Extract energy from
- Undergo treatment
- Making innocuous
- Keep out of reach definitely.

If we add to this classification the idea that resources that are useful in one context can be polluting in another, and vice versa, we obtain a model perfectly applicable to the different parts of our psychological and social heritage.

### *Memories and emotions*

The most accessible and desirable layer of our psychological inheritance are the pleasant memories (conscious or unconscious) of our primary environment, for example a loving and respectful treatment. We can **reuse** these models directly in our adult life. The other layers already need an "ecological" approach. Suppose, for example, that my mother suffocated me in my adolescence by treating me as if I were still a child: this kind of love is no longer reusable as it is, but I will have to **recycle** it.

In the even more problematic layers we stumble upon emotions that disturb us with their impacting energy load or because culture classifies them as belonging to the shadow of our being, such as anger. Sometimes rage is the reaction to the treatment received long ago and, on the contrary, an excess of meekness is a product of the prohibition of anger. **Energy can be extracted** from anger, as long as it is directed against people or situations with which it really has to do. For example, some people make sense of their own past by collaborating with organizations that fight against abuse. They draw energy from their indignation to counteract the feeling of helplessness.

Sexual problems often are not only residues of an environment and rarefied concepts that surrounded sexuality in childhood, but in many cases also of direct abuse. In this case, the notion of sexuality that the person, marked by that experience, has incorporated into his or her personality should be **treated**.

Strength (physical, verbal or psychic) may be an authentic expression of the person, but it can also arise from an early need for hiding or compensating for your weakness. (Philosopher Theodor Adorno says that "you are truly loved only in a relationship where you can show yourself weak without provoking strength.") The work of assuming one's own history instead of acting it out on others can lead a person to deal with his impulses of strength and **make them innocuous**. And if those impulses reaches the extreme of trying to resolve conflicts with violence (physical or verbal or psychic), the treatment to be applied would be what radioactive waste in the physical world deserves: **keep out of reach permanently**. Once this step has been taken, the previous personal experiences that can motivate or explain, but in no case justify, the violence can be treated.

### *We run away from pain*

Does it sound simple? So why don't we change? Why do we repeat acts that once hurt us? Why don't we realize that there is a room inside us where we keep the props of our childhood drama? Or, if we intuit it, why do we act as if we had lost the key to enter there? Why, even so, people closest to us have direct access to this interior space of ours, which, in the case of children, even becomes their first environment? It is as if, until we manage to tell our own version of this childhood drama openly, we will narrate it by staging it, thereby turning people close to us into representations of the characters of the past. But what prevents us from telling that story directly?

On the ecological level it is difficult to assume what happened in our environment, its consequences and give up our comfort, at least immediately. In the psychological we must also overcome an even more powerful human tendency: to try to avoid the painful. Psychiatrist R.D. Laing said: "Life is full of inevitable pains. The only pain that can be avoided is the pain that comes from trying to avoid pain." An adult may understand this phrase, but not children who can't carry their sorrows without the help of adults.

### *The child and the false self*

What if the one who is inflicting harm on you, although with good intention, is precisely the person on whom you depends? Where will children get the physical and psychological

resources to deal with that paradox? If they has to choose between expressing their true self (with all its needs and emotions) and the acceptance of adults (indispensable for their survival), children instinctively adopt a false self that confuses need with what is available; love one deserves simply because one exists with recognition for what one does; ways of being with ways of being liked; respect with the prohibition of questioning.

This last taboo also prevents the adults from becoming spokespersons for the truth of their childhood. In our Judeo-Christian culture, even the unbelievers have embraced the fourth commandment – that of "Honor your father and your mother". Identifying "honor" or "respect" with unconditional praise and silencing of any critical voice may serve to ensure a patriarchal power structure, but not to establish relationships of mutual trust and even less to raise daughters and sons who learn not to adapt to the system but become happy adults who are even able to change the system. Many adults act, even when they are no longer dependent on older people, as if they were still those shy youngsters who should not make mom sad or call dad "dumb" or point to a teacher's mistake.

Many people use mechanisms to deny truths that are too scary to assume. It may be useful to look at the typical sentences we use for denying what we might have experienced as abuses and injustices in our childhood:

#### MINIMIZE:

- Others have had a much worse time than me ...
- I know it happened ... but only once in a while ...
- It didn't really bother me ...
- I was barely at home, so it didn't affect me ...

#### RESIST:

- That was a long time ago ...
- What happened happened. Now is now ...
- I've always known, but now I need to go forward ...
- I have nothing to do with them ...
- Things are the way they are and period ...

#### SKIP / BLOCK:

- I do not remember anything...
- Everything was normal ...
- I had a beautiful childhood, we did many excursions ...

#### EXCUSE / JUSTIFY:

- I deserved it...
- Everyone did the same in those times ...
- They just didn't know anything else ...
- I know they loved me, only they haven't been able to manifest it ...
- They did the best they could ...

#### BALANCE:

- It made me strong (it did me good) ...
- I had everything I needed ...
- I knew they really loved me ...
- It has strengthened my character ...
- But they were good people ...

Many self-help books or methods with therapeutic claims also offer simplistic mixtures of "positive thinking", "New Age" concepts and of misinterpretations of the law of karma. Judgments of the type "you create your reality, regardless of the past, with your thoughts" or

"we choose our parents" suggest to adults seeking relief for their childhood wounds and for their feelings of guilt that they should blame themselves for their suffering and that nothing can redeem them unless they feel the prescribed "forgiveness".

### ***Truth liberates***

I have found sustenance for my own personal growth and for my work in helping other people in different sources. For example in one of my Buddhist meditation teachers who taught me that it is truth that liberates and not the effort to be free. Or in the poems of Mario Benedetti that remind me that the most vain of all efforts is the attempt to forget, since forgetting not only does not exist, but "is so full of memory / that sometimes there is no room for remembrances / and we must throw grudges overboard "(From "That great simulacrum").

And in the unwavering commitment to the truth as the basis of authentic love and sincere dialogue between generations, present in all the books of the ex-psychoanalyst Alice Miller (*Prisoners of Childhood, For Your Own Good, The Untouched Key, Banished Knowledge, Paths of Life, The Body Never Lies* etc.). For her, parents who really love their children try to find out what they unconsciously do or have been able to do to them, without refusing to find out and without worrying about the record of their own sins. The new generations could give their children the same respect and tolerance that culture expect from children towards their parents, so that these children develop all their abilities.

Doing psychological cleansing is not the same as trying to forget past pains. In order not to be conditioned by them it is necessary to address feelings such as anger, fear, grief... Only after facing them and assuming them can we experience what it is to be truly adult and free.

*Oblivion is not victory  
over the evil or anything  
and if it is the veiled form  
to make fun of history  
that's what memory is for  
that opens wide  
looking for some place  
which returns what we lost  
don't forget the one who pretends to forget  
but the one who is able to forget*

Mario Benedetti (From "Vignettes of my Vineyard")

Being able to define how one wants to be loved and what one experiences as harm (even if caused by one's own parents and despite their intentions) is a fundamental human right. Not making use of this right - at least retroactively - does not cure anything. Rather it deepens the wounds of childhood and leads adults to live in the emotional state of the child, opting for ways of reacting and acting that, although in the past served as mechanisms of survival, today hinder their growth.

Who would think of consuming contaminated food only out of respect for the good intentions of those who provide it? Even so, we continue to swallow things that have been offered to us and make our children swallow the same things, even though our living conditions (social, cultural, psychological and material) could allow us a healthier "diet".

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