Ecotherapy to rebuild bonds with the living world

Bruno Rousseau
Gestalt therapist, coach, and supervisor

Bruno Rousseau is a Gestalt therapist[1], coach, and supervisor. From the moment he first grasped the importance of ecological issues, and constantly seeing how human health correlates to the health of the planet as a whole, he has dedicated himself to rebuilding bonds between humans and non-humans, working for the health of all using the tools provided by engaged coaching and his ecotherapy practice. He is a member of the Climate Coaching Alliance (CCA) and a coach for the Climate Enterprise Convention (CEC).

As the founder of La Voie du Contact, Bruno Rousseau focuses on bodily and emotional processes to create the conditions needed for the people and teams he supports to move forward. He is also a "Work that Reconnects" workshop facilitator.

I welcome Antoine to my office for our first session. I offer him a coffee and finish my cup of tea. He briefly tells me about his family, professional and social situation. His words are all tinged with his fear of the future. "It began with videos I watched obsessively on YouTube, showing all the damage we're doing to our planet. And now I see that future as bleak." "I'm worried for my children." "I'm worried about losing all my energy if that's all I think about."

This fear of the future finds its way into my sessions. Is it linked to Antoine, to my own eco-anxiety, to the situation? In the here-and-now of my encounter with Antoine, I allow myself to be touched by visions of a bleak future. Since I am particularly eco-anxious (or eco-lucid!) myself, this is a stance that requires me to look for support outside the sessions (such as a network of colleagues working on themes relating to the climate, biodiversity collapse and social emergencies) and during sessions (such as my breathing and bodily sensations when talking to Antoine), helping me to endure the discomfort of an intense and prolonged emotional experience that includes waves of fear, sadness, anger and helplessness.

After several months of therapy, I ask Antoine if he would join me for a walking session in a park near my practice. I get the impression that taking a short walk together in the fresh air opens up a whole new world to us: the pace of our steps, the physical proximity between our walking selves, the way he/I/we stop at the red light before entering the woods, the way he/I/we are moved by the bend of a tree, the color of the pond, the sound of parakeets crisscrossing the sky above our heads allow me to engage with what is emerging in the most intimate way possible. And to support Antoine through his fears of an emotional tsunami while being accompanied by the living world all around us.

In parallel with the sessions, Antoine gradually begins to share his vision of the world with his family, friends and colleagues, allowing the associated feelings to well up. He meets people who share his worries, gets involved in environmental projects and tells me that his eco-anxiety weighs less heavily on him. "I'm getting much better at living with it, and it helps me stay aware of what's going on..."

ACCEPTING EXISTENTIAL ANGST AND ECO-ANXIETY

Gestalt therapists[1] see the emotions and existential angst associated with certain situations as phenomena they contribute to. Anxiety associated with existential givens (freedom and responsibility, loneliness, the search for meaning) is a source of transformation when accepted and harnessed. Otherwise, it risks being concealed and is likely to trigger compensation mechanisms such as addiction, overconsumption, and hyperactivity.

For existentialists, the mere fact of being in the world and confronted with the freedom inherent in every moment gives rise to anxiety. And because this anxiety is linked to existence, we should not try to eliminate it. Existential angst is a source of engagement and creativity and drives our actions in the world.

1 Gestalt is a therapy first developed in the 1950s in the USA. It focuses on the process of contact between human beings and their environment and gives a central place to bodily and emotional dimensions.

Alongside this, eco-anxiety phenomena are developing, particularly in light of growing awareness of global warming, the collapse of biodiversity and increasingly violent social tensions.

Eco-anxiety is a fear of the future, an anticipatory fear that reflects a high degree of emotional intelligence. It is rooted in a lucid analysis of the state of the world and caused by a certain malfunctioning of society. Ultimately, eco-anxious people are rational and perceptive beings in a world that is neither.

The Gestalt paradigm, whereby a person and their environment are indivisible, precludes perceiving anxiety as "belonging" to the person suffering from it. Gestalt invites us to consider our anxiety as primarily belonging to the situation, here and now.

As therapists, we need to let ourselves be touched by the situation to help us move closer to our clients, who increasingly suffer from the violence engendered by being cut off from the living world. Once I allowed myself to physically experience a form of eco-anxiety in my own body, many of my clients began to share their questions and concerns about these subjects.

HOW ECOPSYCHOLOGY CAN HELP

The term ecopsychology was coined in 1992 by American writer and historian Theodore Roszak.[2] A transdisciplinary field born of the ecological crisis, ecopsychology explores deep-rooted interrelations between nature and the human psyche.

The approach is heavily influenced by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who founded the deep ecology movement. This movement challenges the fundamental assumptions of the industrial growth society, one of whose principles is that the world is not a resource humankind can exploit at will.

Ecopsychology "explores the way in which our cultural separation from nature causes not only neglectful and destructive behavior toward our environment but also a great many widespread problems such as depression and addiction."[3] This observation led Joanna Macy to draw up a set of practices she named "work that reconnects" to foster an emotional reconnection with the community of the living world as a whole and overcome despair and the temptation to embrace denial in response to ecological and social situations. For example, as part of the Convention des Entreprises pour le Climat, we invite managers to write a "letter to someone in the future", a family member or friend who will read it in twenty years' time.

As part of the ecopsychology approach, the ecotherapy practiced by professional therapists, particularly in relation to problems with inner transition, eco-anxiety and distress caused by the increasingly visible signs of the collapse of our ecosystems, seeks to move beyond the dualisms of humans and nature, body and mind.

CONTACT WITH OUR INNER NATURE, CONTACT WITH NATURE... SO WE CAN TAKE ROOT AGAIN

Contact includes all movements between a sentient being and their environment. "Tact" refers to the tactile nature of touch and the delicacy of that touch, while "con" (meaning "with") refers to otherness. I cannot touch without being touched, which opens the door to something new.

But we are gradually losing this contact, spending hours and hours on cellphones and in front of computers. David Abram invites us to "reacquaint ourselves with the sensuous world in which our practices and technologies are rooted." We need to re-root ourselves by getting back to our bodies.

The notion of the ***body as contact*** brings us closer to experiencing the body, in the sense of a living organism constantly in motion. Whereas the body in our daily life tends to be a *body as machine*, which does not connect us to the world. Too often it has become a resource to be managed, optimized, and maintained like a productive tool exploited to achieve results.

I am still often amazed when I see the insights of the people I help, working with them to create experiments during sessions, including with the bodily dimension. For instance, by expressing the feeling associated with a difficult situation through a movement of "push against" by pressing our hands against each other.

CONCLUSION :

"Our experience of pain for the world springs from our interdependency with all living things, which is also where our power to act in their name derives from. When we stifle our pain for the world, or when we treat it as a personal pathology, the power to be part of its healing is diminished." (Joanna Macy)

The health of people, organizations and the Earth is one and this very indivisible health needs to be invented!

2 Roszak, T. (1992). The voice of the earth: An exploration of ecopsychology. University of California Press.

3 Macy, J., & Young Brown, M. (1998). Coming back to life: Practices to reconnect our lives, our world. New Society Publishers.