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# 1

## Beyond Universals: Local Regeneration

By revolution of the mind, I mean not merely a refusal of victim status. I am talking about an unleashing of the mind's most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change.

(Robin Kelley, 2002a, p. 191)

To talk of psychology in the singular has always been inaccurate. From its beginnings the proper focus for psychology has been contested, resulting in multiple approaches to theories and practices, or to what we are calling “psychologies” in the plural. While certain approaches undoubtedly have prevailed in creating what could be called a mainstream, holding the bulk of institutional funding and positions, many alternate approaches to psychology have thrived in small pockets. Those psychologically minded people who have been schooled in the mainstream, and have been later able to improvise and join the kinds of cultural work needed to transform colonial and (post)colonial legacies, have undergone a re-orientation in how they approach psychological suffering and healing. Of what does this re-orientation consist?

In this chapter, we will discuss some of the inadequacies of the current models of mainstream psychology, and propose an alternative approach. We will give several examples of successful liberation psychology projects and discern what they accomplished and what they have in common.

### **Inadequacy of current psychological models**

Though we have been trained as psychologists, we have each found it necessary to defect from professional interpretations focused entirely on individuals and families, and on mental constructs separated from the cultural, social, and economic worlds in which they are embedded. We do not want to assume that the role of psychology is to help individuals and families adapt to the status quo when this present order contributes so massively to

human misery, psychological and otherwise. Our psychology should not exist in a vacuum of disconnected theory where classrooms, research, and clinical encounters are considered apart from conflicts and suffering in society, where personal history is severed from the historical context and social institutions one has inherited.

Individual psychology began in the early twentieth century and flourished in the United States within a medical model that framed the professional psychologist as a quasi-medical expert who could work with issues too problematic, repetitive, or taboo to discuss casually with friends. For those who could afford individual treatment on an ongoing basis, and who lived in cultural contexts where various sorts of silencing made visits to a psychotherapist a healing strategy, the process could be extremely helpful. Many still benefit from individual therapy. However, the situation surrounding therapy and its original foci has changed dramatically. Incest, child abuse, domestic violence, sexuality, and drug and alcohol abuse are more widely discussed. Many see such issues not only as individual matters, but also as linked to issues of normalized power structures, gender relations, and ongoing cultural trauma. Further, the incidence of issues of collective trauma, where the victim is not a sole individual but a whole group, has grown astronomically. Here, sheer numbers make individual work impractical. Psychological scars and post-traumatic stress from war, violence, terror, genocide, sudden toxic pollution, natural disaster, and resultant displacement and forced migration have led to a need for psychological practices that can repair the bonds among people as well as the narrative threads of an individual life history. Lost rituals, social networks, beliefs, and trust are not only individual but collective issues, and cannot be rebuilt in private spaces alone. Other forms of ongoing group trauma, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, affecting vast numbers of people who no longer need to be silent about their suffering, can perhaps best be dealt with in public rather than private settings, milieus where people can recognize that their suffering has common roots and is shared. Additionally, there are issues connected with historical memory and amnesia, the refusal of national discourses to properly honor and teach the history of such events as slavery and the Native American genocide in the United States, the dictatorships and terror in Latin America, or the Holocaust in Europe. These require a public settling of psychological accounts that far exceeds the capacities of the individual clinical encounter.

### **Redrawing disciplinary boundaries**

There are important psychologists and activists around the world who are improvising new practices and theories in order to cope with this climactic change. They are often ignored by more mainstream professionals and funding sources. Much of psychology, because it aspires to be a science, lacks a

connection to related contemporary interdisciplinary work in the humanities as well as to innovative projects being carried out by progressive cultural workers who are not professional psychologists. This artificial damming of potential tributaries to psychology has left a desert surrounding a discipline which has hoped to see itself as a scientific rather than an interdisciplinary and interpretive endeavor.

When rivers are dammed, whole areas are deprived of nourishment while others are flooded over. Biodiversity is diminished, and often a single invading species colonizes what was once a rich forest or wetlands environment where many species flourished. In psychology, the process of damming off examples of transformation from activist communities and questions from interdisciplinary and critical theory has led to a situation where universalist and Eurocentric ideas have crowded out the possibility of multiple indigenous psychologies that could be linked in enriching dialogues. We find ourselves often trying to break the dam surrounding the academic discipline of psychology, linking psychological theories, research, and practices to community and arts projects around the world. Working in this desert border area we have found assisted regeneration—a model from environmental restoration—helpful in thinking about restorative psychological and community work.

### **Practices of assisted regeneration**

Contemporary environmentalists speak of assisted regeneration, a process by which humans collaborate to serve biodiversity within devastated environments. The idea of assisted regeneration serves as a metaphor for the work we want to do in psychology and in this book. Grounded in a sense of place, differing according to location, local culture, and social fabric, assisted regeneration in ecology must mean different things in different ecosystems.

Eileen and Joan Bradley invented the Bradley Method of bush regeneration in Australia. The method is applicable in places where overgrazing or clear-cutting has produced tracts of land that are stripped of life and turning into desert. It is also useful in places where exotic plants or lawns have been imported and now require large amounts of water, which is no longer affordable. The method requires that we search for areas where there are still elements remaining of the local biodiversity we wish to foster. The first step may be to fence off an area to work with, to keep cows, goats, or people at bay. We need to be able to identify all the species of plants that are present, and be able to recognize them both in their mature form and as seedlings. Then gradually over time, we strengthen the diversity of sustainable species, even new and hybrid species that begin to emerge, while cutting back on invading or colonizing species. The method is based on a deep trust in the regenerative capacities of nature, and the patience to wait for small changes to create larger ones (Seed, 2001). Ideally, each year more species emerge,

and some begin a succession that creates conditions for others to appear. The microclimate gradually changes as some species begin to repair the soil with shade and leaf mulch, and then eventually climax species may begin to emerge that have not been seen in the area for hundreds of years.

We want to strengthen efforts of assisted regeneration for the theorizing and practice of psychology, focusing on areas at the edge of the discipline where new conversations might develop. What we are attempting to uproot are Western and universalizing assumptions that include the notion that experts trained in the traditions where these assumptions go unquestioned can be placed in charge of the well-being of others. In practice, what we are attempting to protect and build on are cases where individuals and communities have found local, creative, and participatory solutions to problematic conditions and institutions by transforming their psychological relationships to self and other, sometimes in dialogue with psychologists who are transgressing academic boundaries. These projects are ones that regenerate hope and a sense of agency through the birthing of novel psychological spaces for creative dialogue. We want to be able to recognize such efforts both as seedlings just beginning and in their more mature form, where they have begun processes of transformation which begin to affect whole communities and regions, even national policies and governments.

### **Association of Maya Ixil Women, Guatemala**

An example of the sort of project we have been studying is one that has been created in the aftermath of many years of war and violence in Guatemala by a group of women in the Ixil region, who formed an organization called Association of Maya Ixil Women—New Dawn (ADMI). In dialogue with various consultants, public educators, cultural workers, and activists, including peace psychologist M. Brinton Lykes, the group created and coordinated a library, several development projects, an educational program for children, and an ongoing participatory action research project to collect testimony about the effects of the war on women and children in their region. As the women met to document their lives with photographs and share their histories and stories, their voices constructed a community narrative that went beyond a report on “facts”:

They embed their register of the number of deaths in a set of interrogations that situate their understanding of the event within the context of their rights as human beings and as indigenous peoples. They express sorrow and outrage alongside their solidarity with those who were killed and their families. The innocence of the victims starkly implicates the murderers in an unjust war. Equally important, the women analysts tell us about their rituals for mourning their losses and commemorating the lives of the deceased families, rituals that were also disrupted by the war. Thus the “facts” are embedded in past practices and reflect the symbolic

systems that are ruptured in the war's wake. The women of ADMI stand with those who have been killed while affirming their commitment to struggle for a better and more just peace. The end of the war was an occasion to recover lost bodies and to rethread ritual practices within a contemporary context, thereby reclaiming not only loved ones but also the stories of the past and the challenges they pose for the future.

(Lykes, Blanche, & Hamber, 2003, p. 4)

This work with women suffering from the impact of war went far beyond an attempt to treat individual victims suffering from trauma. It began to heal rifts in the community, and reconstitute a sense of value in a shared future. Some women involved with the project learned new skills in technology, became consultants in other communities, spoke publicly in national forums, wrote grant proposals, began economic development projects, and joined national and regional efforts to build a more just society. In an environment notable for rigid class and ethnic boundaries, this work has created a transnational rupture through which the technologies of social science research, and some of the privileges of the elite to participate in international human rights discourse, have been claimed by rural women with only a fifth- or sixth-grade education. Their voices have evolved through engagement with international media, and are not simply "authentic" testimonies of the "marginalized" but the outcome of an unfolding collaborative process of dialogue and representation. While violence and repression continues against individuals and communities doing human rights work in Guatemala, ADMI publicly bears witness in the international arena to its effects.

### **The Green Belt Movement, Kenya**

Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement instituted a very different project with similar values in Kenya. The Green Belt Movement began with the fortunate encounter in 1977 of Maathai, working with a group of Kenyans interested in environmental issues, and the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK). The NCWK had emerged from the period of colonialism as an organization representing all sectors of Kenyan women that had previously been segregated along racial and ethnic lines. Discussions and seminars were being arranged by the organization through which Kenyan women could begin to critically analyze their own situation. Rural women identified their needs for firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter, and income. This signaled the dwindling of resources to sustain their families. Maathai, a biologist, was invited to speak to the group about problems of deforestation and desertification in Kenya that had concerned her for years, and was then elected to work on the Executive Committee on issues of environment and habitat. During a NCWK seminar attended by Maathai, members of the group discussed the growing problems of malnutrition in Kenya due to the transition to a globalized market

economy in rural areas, where less and less food for domestic consumption was being grown. A process of discussion, experimentation, and innovation within the NCWK led to a national campaign of tree planting to begin to address the needs identified by the rural women. Through the careful learning of cultivation, planting, and tending of seedlings, many uneducated rural women were able to earn an income.

Part of the initial difficulty of inertia in embracing the work was psychological. Many of the poor women felt they lacked not only capital but also knowledge and skills to address their challenges. They were conditioned to believe that solutions to their problems must come from outside. They had located the source of power outside of themselves, but had not yet understood the larger context that was affecting their daily lives. Becoming aware of the injustices in international economic arrangements allowed them to see the connection between their dwindling food supplies and economic policies that were not taking their well-being into account. Their development of critical consciousness in citizen education programs importantly included a growing awareness about the link between environmental degradation and increased poverty and violence. Critical consciousness involves decoding the social lies that naturalize the status quo, while searching for alternative interpretations of one's situation. Maathai understood that the planting of trees could also be the planting of ideas and the development of understanding. "When you have the understanding," says Maathai, "you have the energy, you are restless. When you don't, you go to sleep" (2003).

The campaign was embedded within a tradition of historic cultural pride, taking the term "harambee spirit," which had been popularized during the first government after independence means "let's all pull together." Each year they organized a "Save the Land Harambee" celebration. In the first, and many other such local celebrations, trees were planted in honor of local and national leaders who had made important contributions to the liberation of Kenya but whose historic roles were not being honored and taught. The empowering activity of tree planting and tending allowed the women to connect their actions with the solving of the issues they had identified as problematic. In addition to holding their governments accountable for abuses of power, corruption, and environmental mismanagement, they made a shift in holding themselves accountable to bring into being the leadership values of justice, integrity, and trust that they wished to see in their national leaders.

Today, the women of the Green Belt Movement have planted and nurtured over 30 million trees, created 6000 income-producing tree-nurseries in Kenya, and provided jobs for 100,000 people, mostly women. The project is an international model being replicated all over the world. When Maathai won a Nobel Prize in 2004 for her work, she communicated the reciprocal relation between healing the earth and healing ourselves: "We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own."

Restoration of the environment proceeded hand in hand with psychological, community, and political restoration. The Green Belt Movement includes as its accomplishments the empowerment of thousands of individuals and rural communities, community mobilization and inspiration, an improved image of the capacities of women, increased advocacy and networking activities, survival of the movement in spite of political persecution, extensive historical documentation and recognition of its work, and movement toward democracy. The Green Belt Movement proceeded toward a deeper understanding of the interdependence of environmental preservation with democratic and peaceful processes of government, and was part of laying the foundation for a peaceful transition to democracy in Kenya in 2002. Maathai and her collaborators call on African leaders to build fair, democratic, and just societies, in which the creativity and energy of their citizens can flourish, linking macropolitical context with the intimate well-being of each person. Maathai survived beatings, imprisonment, divorce, and death threats, all occasioned by her activism. In 2002 she was elected to the Kenyan parliament with 98 per cent of the vote.

### **Dynamics of liberatory work**

When we look at these two different projects through the lens of liberation psychology we can see a series of related values and themes emerge inflected by local conditions. Each project has organized a psychological space on multiple fronts that opens a dialogue through and beyond individual suffering. Each project evolved in its scope and purpose as the experience and identities of the women participating in it began to transform. Beginning with an analysis of the history, needs, and conditions of daily life for women in the past and present, the work continued with an interrogation of causes and a critical analysis of political, religious, economic, and gender dynamics impacting personal history. Photography, monuments, performance, theater, art, media, and other forms of documentation were utilized to begin to give voice to issues haunting the present that have not yet found a public articulation (see Chapter 12). New relationships were formed, as well as new possibilities and hope for community and solidarity. Discussions evolved toward economic projects that could affect survival and psychological well-being, and the transformation of conditions for the next generation. These discussions took place in an environment where ongoing violence continued, and the group began to take up the question of how to prevent further violence and transform the larger social and political context. Small communities began to link with others to share experience and technologies, to build a public record of their work, and to educate others about the conditions affecting them.

What places these projects in the field of psychology is that central to their success is a group of individuals who are going through a process of re-imagining their lives, evolving as narrators and protagonists of their own

history. Their projects are not one-issue campaigns, though many of the single projects they take up are critical. Yet more important than any individual action is the process of psychological development through which participants grow stronger in their capacities for survival, critical analysis, emergence of new ideas, flexibility of action, community building, and the process of hopeful self-organization. One of the goals of such projects is not homogeneity of thought or agreement on all issues, but the psychological capacity to bear a dialogue with difference, to tolerate conflicting experiences and points of view, while still finding common ground and constructing a shared future (see Chapter 10). In both projects, people from different ethnic backgrounds and with different political positions, without full agreement on many issues, were able to work together to transform their futures. Returning to the image of assisted regeneration in devastated areas, we note the renewed vitality and vibrancy of the individuals and communities that have engaged in the work of ADMI and the Green Belt Movement. Small local changes have seeded changes in neighboring communities. The ideas that organize their work have acted like pollen in distant places.

### **Symbolic interruptions**

One way in which successful liberation psychology practices can be particularly effective and insightful is by inventing projects that symbolically interrupt repressive government discourse and public amnesia about suffering. Though the projects operate at a local level, they often have a national or even international significance. Perhaps the most famous of such practices was begun by Gandhi's salt march to Dandi in 1930 (Gandhi, 1972). The British colonial government had imposed a salt tax in early 1930 that prevented the sale or production of salt by anyone in India except the British. Of course, everyone in India used and needed salt, and those living along the coastal zones were used to collecting it themselves. Gandhi urged his followers to use nonviolent civil disobedience to continue making salt for themselves. He began a 78-mile walk for 23 days from Sabarmati to Dandi, collecting thousands of people to accompany him on the way. Salt was sold illegally all over the country. Over 60,000 people were arrested in a month, including Gandhi. The international press followed the march closely.

Typical of many liberation psychology projects, the salt march and its nonviolent resistance enabled local groups to see the relevance of resistance to their lives. They were able to participate cooperatively at the local level, breaking out of passivity and despair. The issue was important enough to mobilize a massive following, but at the same time innocuous enough not to alienate centrist parties. It broke apart the facade of control and dominance maintained by the British. Finally, it was bold, clever, and satisfyingly

contrary in refusing colonial domination at both a symbolic and practical level, turning the tide in the independence movement.

A contemporary project with similar potentials is the Arlington West Memorial organized in Santa Barbara and Santa Monica by Veterans for Peace (VFP). Each Sunday the group erects a memorial of crosses on the beach, one for each American soldier killed in Iraq, as well as a monument to the now over 600,000 Iraqis who have died. As the number of crosses has grown, more and more local volunteers have come to set them up and take them down each Sunday. A rich process of dialogue and critique about the war, along with personal mourning and reflection, has evolved as thousands of tourists arrive and discover the sites. Families and friends of the dead soldiers come to place names and mementos on the crosses and take part in the process. Veterans for Peace has invited other local community groups to put up similar monuments, and the project has been covered extensively in the national press. While at first glance, the project may appear innocuous and local, it was conceived at a time when the U.S. government was denying the costs of war and preventing the publication of photographs of coffins of soldiers returning to the United States from Iraq. By intervening to symbolically represent the personal and physical costs of war, the VFP has interrupted the lies, distortions, and cover-ups at the national level, contributing to the growth of a massive antiwar effort.

Both the Kenyan and the Guatemalan projects we discussed above also have this quality of beginning as somewhat innocuous local projects while at the same time developing critical symbolic interventions in a repressive national discourse. In Guatemala, there has never been an accounting of the violence and terror imposed by the government on indigenous communities between 1960 and 1996. This included 150,000 deaths, 580 massacres, and the destruction of 440 villages. Over a million people were internally displaced, renting the fabric of local cultures. By collecting stories, creating photographic exhibits, and speaking publicly, the Ixil women are contributing to a countrywide effort to break the silence and demand an accounting and public truth telling about what happened. Because women are organizing themselves, the project also breaks open gender and ethnic stereotypes in a country where indigenous women rarely have opportunities to speak publicly about their experiences. Similarly in Kenya, by focusing on poor rural women as expert agents for economic and environmental change, the project reversed stereotypes. It also interrupted the silence about the corrupt and antidemocratic practices of the government.

Though individual therapy in a clinical setting was not the goal of any of these projects, each has had a profound effect on the psychology of the individuals participating. Through many months of testimony, analysis, discussion, and action, symbolic identity constructions were interrupted and individuals transformed. In fact, organizers of such projects have argued

that individual therapy might be counterproductive in such settings. According to Dr. Roberto Cabrera (1998b) of the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala,

Just retrieving the victims' memories is a worthless re-experience of pain. It should be a social and political space, where society as a whole dares to construct a common history, dares to accept the responsibility of what happened and will be willing to adopt the changes to secure that such atrocities will never happen again.

(p. 3)

Cabrera believes that remembering should lead to dreaming social action projects for the future: "There is no point to look back if it does not help to dream a better future" (p. 3).

In rural locations where individuals have not been exposed to an education based on assumptions of individualism and competitiveness, it is particularly important to strengthen communal traditions after violent disruptions. Identity is constructed in part through cultural symbols that can be both wounded and repaired.

By placing these diverse projects alongside one another, we are helping to collect the practices and construct the theory for the field of liberation psychology. The vitality of these multiple streams of work demonstrates the successes of these ingenious and creative participatory projects that nourish communities that have been stunted, separated from one another, terrorized, controlled, and colonized. Psychology needs to learn important forms of knowledge that develop in the streets, in the arts, and in rural settings—often in the heat of struggle—from experiences in communities where people resist oppression by organizing in creative ways. The river of psychologies of liberation also draws from other contributing streams of thought including liberation theology, Theater of the Oppressed, feminist leadership, collaborative arts, dynamic depth psychologies, critical community psychology, peace psychology, (post)colonial studies, engaged spirituality, queer theory, participatory and critical research, performance studies, and other interdisciplinary work in the humanities. Each involves a turn away from a colonial, ethnocentric Euro-American psychology posing as universal, as it orients toward multiple indigenous psychologies arising in processes of transformation and dialogue with one another. As we bear witness to the confluence of work that can be characterized as psychologies of liberation, shared principles emerge. Rather than offer an exhaustive survey of the history of each tributary, or give a thorough history of practitioners, our hope is to describe the basic principles of such work and to trace the outlines of the kinds of research and community practices that are developing out of this theoretical perspective, and contributing back to it.

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