



Aftereffects of the Carmel Fire

Photograph Edward Kaprov

Reconnecting to Natural Processes of Regeneration After the Carmel Fire

Dr. Eleanor Pardess / January 2011

"For the Tree of the Field is Man's Life"

Deuteronomy 20:19-20

*"For the Tree of the Field is Man's Life,
Like the tree man stretches upwards.
Like man he burns in fire.
And I do not know
where I have been nor where I will be-
like a tree of the field".*

Nathan Zach

This article describes a program that focuses on connecting to nature's powers of healing and regeneration. The program was developed within the last decade at Selah, the Israel Crisis Management Center, in conjunction with Dr. Tzvia Shapira, a lecturer in botany, and has been implemented in seminars for families of victims of terrorist attacks and other disasters. A modular program, it is based on workshops that combine nature walks with reflection and group activities at various stations along the way, followed by indoor creative activities and sharing regarding themes such as- What is the secret to nature's renewal after a fire? What can be learned about the mechanisms of adjustment and growth after trauma?

Program Objectives:

- To strengthen the link between the individual and the natural environment.
- To connect with natural forces of healing and growth.
- To open channels of self-expression and create a safe space for sharing made possible by the protective distance offered by using metaphors and creative means of expression.
- To create new narratives of transformation and regeneration.

Target Groups:

The program is constructed of independent modules, and the contents are adapted to the target group and the age of the participants. The program has four activity sets:

A. For adults. B. For children aged 5-12 and teens aged 13-18; these activities are also suitable for use in educational settings. C. For parents and children together. D. For caregivers (psychologists, social workers, educational counselors etc) designed for enrichment and for reducing burnout and compassion fatigue.

“For the tree of the field is man’s life”:

Reflections in nature: Observing the cycles in nature and connecting with the landscape are likely to open new paths to the landscapes of identity. Experience shows that there is much to be learned from listening to the personal nuances emerging, for example, from the inner reverberations of the encounter with the landscape, from the reactions to the trees that were destroyed in the fire and the animals from the wildlife refuge that were saved. Listening to these nuances may contribute to our ability to validate the subjective experience and the understanding of the different ways in which we look at nature.

Analogies from nature: This component focuses on nature’s wisdom and on understanding the unseen processes taking place in nature. For example, we discuss the various mechanisms trees use to protect themselves in a fire, the function of the root systems, and the processes taking place under the surface even when it seems that

nothing is happening above ground. Understanding the secrets of renewal in nature and developing analogies for healing processes and for mechanisms of survival and adaptation are a starting point for discussing processes of adjustment and change in our world and paving roads to new meaning. Understanding the survival mechanisms in nature and cyclical processes that take place in nature offers a perspective that may open unexpected directions in the encounter with a changing reality.

Exploring the Landscape of the Identity: The Structure of the Program

To date, workshops have lasted 3 hours each, but it is possible to adjust the program to the constraints and needs on site. Below is the structure of a typical workshop:

- I **Introduction** – An explanation is given by the facilitator before heading out.
 - a. **Walking in nature** – “mindful movement.” The walk takes place along a route pre-planned by the staff on the basis of the workshop topic and its participants. While walking, participants are invited to allow their senses to open up to the surroundings – to look, listen, touch and smell – and to focus on the here and now, to be mindful of the immediate experience, which changes from one moment to the next. The emphasis is on looking outwards, and also on looking inwards, while paying attention to details and being willing to encounter what is going on with a "Beginner’s mind" (Kabbat-Zim, 2008; Langer, 2009).
 - b. Short explanations about **healing and renewal in nature**. These explanations are given at the various stations along the way by experts in botany. Emphases are adjusted to the composition and needs of the specific groups, while allowing a great deal of space for questions and for the development of topics raised by the participants.
- II **Creative activity** using materials from nature. For example: an activity focused on identifying resources that may be taken from nature and mobilized in times of difficulty. What does vulnerability mean for you and what does strength mean for you? What does renewal mean for you? Participants are invited to follow the lead of the items spread around the room – including newspaper clippings, old

calendars, and coloring materials – and let these lead them. The transformation the materials undergo during the activity generates a kind of reflection of the transformation in the exterior landscape as well as of that in the interior landscape.

III **Sharing**

In the discussion, participants are invited to share their creations and the process they experienced during the creative activity – What did they encounter on the walk that was meaningful for them? To what were their eyes drawn? The discussion enables the group members to give and receive support to one another. At the conclusion, the session closes with a poem constructed of phrases or sentences selected from the participants' expressions.

Harnessing the Power of Analogies and Metaphors from Nature

Apart from acknowledging nature as a mirror, this program is based on harnessing the power of metaphors in providing a bridge between the inner and the outer reality (Elitzur, 1986) and on the Basic Ph model, which has been developed by Lahad and Ayalon (2000). The starting point is that every human being has coping resources, and that each individual's coping style is unique. The current program addresses both the right brain and the left brain, and enables each participant to express himself/herself through the "language" and channel of communication best suited to them.

What can be learned from research in botany about processes of survival and resilience in harsh conditions?

Following are some central points that have so far been made in groups via analogies from nature on processes that take place after trauma:

- Every organism has its own growth mechanisms and ways of adapting to changing conditions.
- Healing processes may be hidden, taking place under the surface.
- Every process takes its own time and occurs at its own pace. Any attempt to hurry along natural processes is liable to sometimes undermine the chances for healing, renewal and growth.

- The web of life there are complex interrelationships between plants and animals, and between them and their environment.

To date, Selah has run varied workshops, such as a survival workshop in the desert and a wandering sands workshop on the seashore. Following the Carmel fire in 30 December 2010, this article will now focus on examples related to recovery and renewal of forests after fires.

Fires damage not only the landscape but also the basic forest infrastructure. Fire, even when not particularly intense, damages the ecological balance, destroys plants and impairs the ground's ability to be a platform for growth. It may take thirty to forty years for a tree to reach the size of forest trees prior to the fire. Nonetheless, alongside the damage caused by fire, there is also research evidence indicating that positive changes can occur as the result of a fire. Sometimes fires increase the species diversity, and are a catalyst for the appearance of unknown varieties that could not have been revealed under pre-fire conditions, and recycling minerals that were "trapped" in the flora.¹

An issue relevant to renewal after fire is the existence of seeds in the ashes scattered throughout. Forestry experts stress that the current danger is human over-involvement in the natural processes of renewal. They warn of the damage that is liable to be caused as the result of slapdash solutions or hasty attempts to "rehabilitate" the forest ("We just want to see green again").

What can be learned from nature about dealing with the stresses of dislocation and "transplant shock"? Another kind of workshop held as part of the Selah seminars is called "Rooting and Grounding". This workshop is particularly relevant for immigrants since it focuses on what botanists call "transplant shock" and on the sense of uprootedness and the search for grounding that can help to restore some sense of stability in face of the disruption stresses of dislocation due to immigration. One of

¹ In workshops, it is also possible to raise the importance of finding ways to prevent fire and to minimize the damage, and ways to rehabilitate and revive forests after a fire. It should be noted that there are different approaches to handling these issues in the professional literature, as noted by Dr. Avi Perevolotsky and Dr. Gadi Polak in their book "Ecology: Theory and the Israeli Experience": "The view is a mosaic of burned and untouched patches, patches where renewal is from a very recent fire and patches that were burned long ago. In other words, this is a dynamic, interesting and varied ecological mosaic that is very difficult to define by assigning values such as good or bad, beautiful or ugly, or proper or improper... Is fire a blessing or a curse? There is no unequivocal answer to that. We have to remember that there are many ways of looking at the same ecological reality because of different factors – our own personal philosophy, beliefs and positions, and the interest we take in the system."

the lessons that can be learned from botany is that dislocated plants need at least some of the ingredients from the former soil to keep the past roots alive. A tree's chance of survival and regeneration can be improved through an environment that supports the establishment of a root system which integrates growing new roots with the old roots from the past

These analogies from nature often lead to the sharing of personal experience regarding the question: How to preserve the roots and the old soil nurturing interactions- vital connections, values, cultural heritage, meaningful memories and other links to the old land while striking new roots in the new country?

Conclusion

The program and its various components stress the possibilities inherent in reconnecting with nature, and invites participants to encounters in nature with oneself and with others, encounters that can pave new paths in one's landscape of identity.

Nature is a natural source from which participants can draw strength. Experience has shown responsiveness, active participation and moving reactions even from participants who initially seem totally disconnected and frozen. This non-intrusive approach and the combination of outdoor and indoor activities draw participants who are reluctant to participate in other conventional programs. "Being in nature and learning from nature has taught me to calm down and that there is a season and a rhythm to everything", said one of the participants.

Experience has shown the many possibilities of using metaphors from nature as a universal language, and the importance of listening to the nature metaphors people spontaneously volunteer. So, for example, after the Carmel fire, there was a wide range of responses to the view of scorched trees, the ashes and the raw earth. Listening to the nuances of these responses may help strengthen empathic connections while validating the expression of feelings of pain and loss, each person in his or her own individual way.

The link between the landscape of identity and the exterior landscape enables us to broaden the narrative horizon and to build bridges between the personal and the collective. This connection can pave the way to the formulation of a new,

multidimensional and richer narrative, encompassing both the story of the trauma and the story of survival, healing and renewal.