

“....What we really need are contexts conducive to the nurturing of vision, ‘nurseries of vision’ personal and shared....”

Costas Raptis interviews Mina Polemi-Todoulou, president of the Hellenic Association for Systemic Therapy -HELASYTH, for SKAI.gr newspaper, 21/12/2008, right in the middle of Greek youth riots.

“Every day I hear something new and breath-taking during this period we go through” *confesses the psychologist –psychotherapist and president of the Hellenic Association of Systemic Therapy, Mina Polemi-Todoulou, while rushing to anticipate our reservations in respect to the relevance of her scientific field to social phenomena.* “People still think of psychology and psychotherapy as a mainly intrapersonal and intrapsychic matter. Nevertheless, our experience and our multi-systemic approach lead us to look and deal with a wide range of systems - from the very basic focal ones, which are the individual, the couple, the family, the small and large group – to the school classroom and larger social systems like the whole school, community or business - and to even larger processes in the wider society and culture. These processes comprise multiple relations and roles, ranging from those that come down to us from a long way back to newly created ones, within important dyads as man-woman, employee-employer, parent-child, economic partners or rivals and also of values, norms, expectations stemming from the wider civilization. All of these and more are in constant interaction within an astounding complexity, and - as if this was not enough - they keep changing at a very quick pace.”

“It would be a great disservice to ourselves as therapists and trainers and to those whom we try to serve, not to keep consciously aware of all these developments that surround us and flow into everyday life of even small intimate groups. Intimate relations are in a way a thermometer, a mirroring process of the wider systems, which they are part of.”

In what way recent events “took the temperature” of the family units with which you deal with?

“We had the opportunity recently during the dramatization of a family in the context of a group therapy session to live through a dilemma of these days. Parents were wondering “*will we join our children in the demonstrations or not? Will we allow them to go with their friends or try to stop them?*” While this discussion was going on with a focus on what will the children do, the small group that was role-playing the 16 year old daughter (expressing her multiple inner voices) was going increasingly towards the logic “*let us burn the tree!*”. The socio-emotional climate of the discussion started changing when the parents – in this case the two small groups role-playing father’s and mother’s

multiple inner voices - , seeing that this transaction was leading nowhere, understood that they must first open up the dilemmas in a discussion between the two of them -mother and father-, have a look at their own feelings and views, deal with their own anxieties, anger and differences and formulate their own position as a couple, instead of playing the game of "one sewing and the other cutting", as we say. So they hesitantly turned to each other for a discussion and of course we encouraged that. They soon realized how unready they were for such a dialogue between them. The kids commented "you sound like those people on TV not making sense, when they talk among themselves". So, under our direction they made another turn, to themselves this time, (down one more level of complexity, as we say in our jargon), to an inner discussion each with the "many Johns inside" him/her as the playwright Pirandello used to say. They tackled such important questions as: "in reference to what vision of mine will I formulate my own position vis a vis these events?" or "how do I translate this vision into specific personal responsibility and personal course of action?".

"The result of course was that the adolescents developed a completely different feeling. The decision for protest was not taken back; but it was transformed into a strong vindication of their personal stance as to what needs to be built! I would therefore claim that **beyond and above all protests what we really need are contexts conducive to the nurturing of vision, 'nurseries of vision' personal and shared**".

Your approach seems to propose consent rather than conflict. Aren't there issues where conflict is necessary, issues which will be solved only when one side wins over another which loses?

"I partly agree and partly disagree. I believe we should conceive of another type of conflict, where winners and losers will not be people but processes: processes that put people and their humanity in the forefront should "win" over those that kill people or their humanity - the "human quality" in them. In any case some of the major conflicts we experience internally, e.g. with the voice that tells us to stick to yesterday's habits and ways, and impedes our progress as human beings; we need to enter into conflict with this voice. By the same token, in society at large, it is required of us to come into conflict with whatever sub-processes fixate us on structures of the past, impeding forward development. **But that which should always win is life itself, life with its human quality - "anthropia" in Greek.**"

Do you distinguish some particular characteristics in today's youth?

"I do not think we listen to the young attentively enough. It seems to me they try to express and reveal things that are quite new. For example something that I discern - and surprises me - is that they seem to have a tolerance for work instability and insecurity, something that in

older generations was not the case - we sought security and stability. They seem to have a **tolerance for ambiguity and chaos** - I hope creative tolerance - and as psychologists we know that tolerance of ambiguity is a sign of maturity. When you try to close up too quickly a difficult issue or dilemma, to prematurely arrange and reconcile a chaotic situation, you run the risk of simply sliding back to previous structures, which led to dysfunction in the first place."

Do new conditions produce new human subjects?

"The openings of this new period may, if we manage to live through the crisis, reveal to us more beautiful worlds. For example our generation was heavily oriented to work ethic. Today's youth - and I do not refer to those without some kind of a program in their lives - are oriented to friendship. You see how much time they spend in trying to come together and talk among themselves. We lived more turned towards a mystified productivity and we missed out on the process. Also something that I thought these days is that we - the generation of the 'Polytechnic revolt' - sought out a conflict with older generations and the status quo, believing that this would serve the needed change; this happened in many realms of life, as for example stepping out of the established gender and family roles. In those times perhaps that kind of conflict was needed. Nowadays young people look to us the older generation for help and for sharing ideas. There is beauty in this and a challenge. As parents and teachers we have to move on from focusing **on ways to handle conflict across generations to ways of handling a constructive dialogue and building a shared vision.**"

What would this sharing actually mean?

"Let us not dwell on what is heard quite often today, that *"the young/ the children lead the change."* We should not let them alone in that. And we should distinguish: it is for sure their own responsibility to articulate their own vision, lead the change towards this vision and communicate it to others so it can become a shared vision. **Our job is to re-examine and articulate our own vision, as it pertains to our generation, phase of life and experience and furthermore to 'read into' what the young express-** these "young" by the way consist of many different generations themselves: listen to them carefully and you hear that 13year olds feel 10year olds belong to a different generation not due to a simple developmental age difference but in the sense of another socio-cultural reality: *"We in their age did not play such games..."*. Does generation change every four years? Not impossible in these swiftly changing times...

For Mina Polemi-Todoulou, every new generation seeks out opportunities for responsible and useful action, the depravation of which can become quite devastating.

“In order to build a functional collectivity – because a crowd can become quite oppressive and destructive, and we have witnessed this over these last months – it must get through the very **narrow passage called ‘personal responsibility’**. Quite frequently, all of us get carried away and instead of holding on to our own responsibility, we surreptitiously appropriate the responsibility of the other, thus letting down our own. This happens everyday within families, when for example the mother says to her kid: *“come on, let us study for school, so that we get good marks!”*. When responsibilities are shifted around ending up in the wrong hands (roles) it has a crippling effect on all those involved.”

“After all, the old saying as a wise advice always holds true: **“be useful to society”**. This is what parents wished for the children up to as recently as three decades ago, as research has indicated. When you feel useless, you feel unworthy. Then you become angry and when at this critical moment someone starts patronizing or giving you advice, you feel devastated and powerless. Unwillingly, as a post-war generation we cut the grass from under the feet of our children, by trying to provide amply, thus depriving them of responsibilities that the human being by its nature seeks out from the moment it is born. Perhaps this is why our children are so angry: we deprived them of opportunities to be useful as responsible members of functional collectives. **Responsibility awakens dignity, energizes growth and places the foundations for a creative collectivity to be formed.**”