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Education - Research, Leadership, Community



ECOHUMANISM NOW SO THERE WILL BE A TOMORROW

**Integrative Paradigm for Value Education
and Teacher Training for the 21st century**

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“After the Plague – it was some sort of Ebola mutation passed from hand to hand and nose to nose like the common cold – life was different. More relaxed, more natural. The rat race was over, the freeways were clear all the way to Sacramento, and the poor dwindling ravaged planet was suddenly big and mysterious again. It was a kind of miracle really, what the environmentalists had been hoping for all along, though of course even the most strident of them wouldn’t have wished for his own personal extinction, but there it was.”

(“After the Plague” in *After the Plague*, T.C. Boyle, 2001)

Introduction

As if the climate crisis and the destruction of our natural environment, the collapse of liberal democracy and the rise in populist regimes, the widening of economic gaps and the immigration of millions of displaced persons were not enough, at the onset of 2020 we were bombarded with COVID-19 pandemic. Up until this point (August 2020), the virus has infected over 20 million people and is a constant reminder to us, Humankind – both that we are invincible, and that nature has a way of its own, for better or for worse.

Whether a metaphorical or a literal claim, COVID-19 is here now serving as an empiric testament of the fact that Nature and Culture are intertwined. Henceforth, we are bound to address life challenges not as if they were in discrete

arenas but rather as serving within a system – an eco-system – in which all is interconnected and have an interwoven impact.

As educators who seek to cultivate the younger generations and equip them with insight, sensitivity and abilities for facilitating a thriving life, we can no longer act categorically, separating humanistic ethics, social justice, the pursuit of peace, democratic citizenship, a healthy way of life and environmental sustainability. The increasing proximity between these fields has been manifested in the past years by the employment of “the language of sustainability” – originating in the discourse regarding the wellbeing of the natural environment – when addressing diverse predicaments and challenges of contemporary human civilization. Thus, for instance, social sustainability discourse and action came into being (health resources, welfare, housing and pension), as well as democratic sustainability (free elections, human rights, freedom of the press, and equality before the

law), cultural sustainability (conservation of cultural diversity and traditions of communal life) and educational sustainability (trained and competent teachers, appropriate curricula and suitable accommodation for high-standard and equal education).

In Kibbutzim College of Education, as well as in other institutions in the world, the recognition of the need for an alternative approach – theoretically and practically – has matured. We, who represent thought and research in various fields of education, and who have an inclination towards the Humanities, the Social and the Natural Sciences, are setting forth **Ecohumanism** as the most needed and appropriate ethical stance and research paradigm for the present time. One of the goals in the College's Existing Mission Statement is cultivating humanistic educators holding Social-Environmental accountability. Now is the time for the next phase – that is, taking responsibility for a holistic and integrative moral education committed to protect and enhance environmental and social systems in order to endorse the quality of living for both Humanity and Nature. We believe that **the timeliest now is Ecohumanism, in order that there will be a tomorrow.**

It is worth noting that as educators we have already gained prior, theoretical experience in this type of naturalistic holistic concept. In every teacher-training academic institution in the world, a central unit of study is dedicated to the scholarly work of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the father of natural education. Following his honed senses, more than 250 years ago, Rousseau identified the enormous dangers looming due to the rise of the bourgeoisie – a class who until today worships the artificial life style, is devoted to wanton consumerism, and turns its back on the natural way of life. In his own words, “He forces one soil to nourish the products of another, one tree to bear the fruit of another. He mixes and confuses the climates... He wants nothing as Nature made it, not even man; for him, man must be trained like a school horse; man must be fashioned in keeping with his fancy like a tree in

his garden” (*Emile or On Education*, p. 37).

Rousseau touches upon all of these issues that are still relevant today. First, he writes, we should not tolerate the limited economic elite who enjoys an abundance of wealth alongside a large portion of the population suffering poverty and hunger; second, we must not accept a human reality in which “man is born free and he is everywhere in chains”; third, we ought not put up with a situation in which children are educated according to their parents' economic status and they are not given the opportunity to receive the best education towards full humanity; and fourth, we cannot comply with the warped concept that seeks ways by which to reengineer the climate, flora and fauna, and humanity rather than accepting Nature as is.

Relating to Rousseau's philosophy raises a consideration of the dichotomy between the anthropocentric attitude (perceiving man as unique and a separate entity of nature) and the biocentric attitude (recognizing man as an integral part of nature). However, just as there is no need to choose sides in the debate whether humans are by nature good or evil – because human nature probably contains seeds of both – likewise we do not have to reach a verdict regarding Anthro- or Bio- centrism. Human beings will always be both Nature's creatures, part and parcel of Nature, in addition to also being reflective and critical creatures, thusly separate from or alien to nature in some respects. Either way, the ethical and concrete significance of the Ecohumanistic position is that we must urgently develop the best harmonic balance and relations between human civilization and the natural environment. Quoting naturalist and philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who believed in our ability to lead our life according to our rational nature: “In so far only as men live in obedience to reason, do they always necessarily agree in nature”; [and] “the good which every man who follows after virtue desires for himself, he will also desire for other men.” Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book IV).

To conclude these words of introduction,

Ecohumanistic value education is, according to our viewpoint, the immediate suitable response to the human challenges of today. Mass atrocities, horrors of the 20th century linger in our consciousness: world wars, the Holocaust, oppressive totalitarian regimes, atom bombs and genocide. And what lies ahead is not only the present-day Coronavirus pandemic, but also destructive trends consisting of devastation of the natural environment and climate crisis, widening economic gaps and mass immigration of refugees, the demise of liberal democracy in favor of populist regimes, rejection of serious culture in favor of the light entertainment industry, addiction to screen culture, and the demise of liberty and privacy under the rule of digital technology and artificial intelligence.

It is crystal clear to us, as it is for many others in the world, that it is not acceptable to perceive crises and challenges lying ahead as separate arenas. In turn, they should be seen as comprising a system in which they are intertwined and affect one another. In light of the Ecohumanistic outlook, we offer ethical, holistic education that aims at empowering the younger generations and instructing them to successfully address the challenges of the 21st century. We present an educational paradigm that seeks to cultivate sensitivities, sensibilities, capacities, and dispositions; enabling the students to enjoy environmental sustainability, humanistic democracy, social justice, physical and mental health, a sense of belonging and cultural-educational affluence.

Basically, what we have here is a worldview and ethical stance and not a matter of technology and capital. **It is a commitment to merge the humanist “I and Thou” dialogical interpersonal relations (cherishing the humanity of every person as an end in itself) with the ecological consideration of nature not as a commodity to own and use egotistically but as a community to join harmoniously and respectfully. It is the desire to create a peace within us, within our fellowman, within our world** (The notion of peace in Biblical Hebrew,

Shalom, refers to blessedness and harmony in the manifold aspect of life – bodily and spiritually, in the private as much as in the political sphere). Or, as it is articulated in *The Challenges of Sustainability* (ed. Ilana Avisar, Kibbutz HaMeuchad, 2016), "we must learn to live with others and not at the expense of others".

Basic Terminology and Guiding Principles

Humanist and democratic ethical stance: holding human dignity, equality, diversity, and growth as universal core values, beyond any set of values – religious, ideological or economic. It is a commitment to provide every man and woman with the rights and opportunities for social welfare, to enjoy self-realization, and participate meaningfully in the cultural, social, and political spheres of life.

Ecological approach: Considering life on the planet as ecosystems – characterized by complex relationships and reciprocal influences among the diverse elements, natural and cultural – that have to be studied, managed, and protected for the sake of maintaining their health and vital functioning.

The sustainability approach is an ethical stance committed to optimal long-term existence and preservation of societal and natural systems whose contribution to the thriving of Humankind and/or Nature is evident, i.e. social, democratic, cultural, and environmental sustainability. Providing long-term solutions, this approach is aimed at sustaining the biophysical and sociocultural components of the dynamic social-ecological systems as well as preventing investments and initiatives that are destructive to such systems.

Quality of life is much more than economic growth and materialistic standard of living. The alternative, multidimensional and holistic, is looking into manifold elements of

wellbeing and growth – very much along the lines with Maslow's psychological paradigm of self-actualization (pyramid of needs) and Nussbaum's Capability Approach (realization of the distinctively human capabilities). According to this holistic approach, we must evaluate our quality of living according to various diverse standards, such as life expectancy and infant mortality, equal opportunity and gender equality, human rights and equality before the law, governmental transparency and trust in political institutions, public services and democratic participation, general education and quality of leisure, community life and a sense of personal fulfillment.

Health signifies full and optimal function of an organism, of a societal organization and of the natural environment – according to their innate nature and distinctive characteristics. The Ecohumanist approach is holistic and aims towards healthy mind and body, healthy society and nature – health for people, community and Mother Earth.

Dialogical culture replaces the win-lose approach of success at the expense of others, by that of attentive, respectful and peaceful shared life and coexistence – hence a liaison between ecology and humanism, as well as between interpersonal and inter-cultural relationship. Resting on the basis of mutual trust, respect and good will, dialogue rejects modes of instrumental manipulation and control so abundant in human behavior towards fellow humans and natural resources. In their stead, it lays the foundation for working together towards a common good through humane, reasonable, fair and harmonistic dialogue.

The prevention approach precedes the repair and rehabilitation approach. Both morally (preventing suffering, destruction, and injustice) and economically-practically (in utilitarian terms), it is preferable to prevent neglect, disease, poverty and ignorance rather than enforcing, imprisoning, healing and rehabilitating later on. For example: proper nutrition and a healthy life-

style are more reasonable than endless diets and daily intake of medication; decreasing birthrate and faring with less consumption in order to maintain and sustain our natural resources is much more reasonable than coping with the detrimental outcomes of population explosion, air pollution, soil depletion, ocean-dead zones, and the extinction of species.

Glocal patriotism is the caring, responsibility and active involvement in favor of ecohumanistic welfare in our local and global arenas. It allows us to veer from the conventional clashes between Political Right Left, religious and secular, nationalism vs. universality, and one ethnic group facing another. It enables us to unite efforts in order to address ecological, social and political challenges with relative ease, because in our current reality different phenomena have implication beyond borders of place and time, so that collaborations promote the local and global common good (win-win situations).

Academic life which is engaged with public problems rather than with disciplinary scholarship. This principle, very much inspired by Maxwell's book *Global Philosophy*, urges us to identify the ultimate end of academic life not with the acquisition of knowledge but rather with the development and mastery of wisdom in the art of living. Hence, very much in the tradition of Montaigne's educational thought, in all our academic and educational undertaking we should connect the "tree of knowledge" with the "tree of life" and measure our success not in the mastery of subject matter but rather in sound and thriving life.

Slow-paced moderation grants more and harms less. As it is written in Ecclesiastes, "Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income." This same logic works for fast-pace workaholism as well as for maximizing multi-tasking performances. When overloaded, pressured or over stressed, the result is illness, distorted perspective and conduct, and often mental collapse. However, when we learn how

to take a break, have humble aspirations, and take the time for moral deliberation, spiritual meditation and attentive dialogue; when we are one with a work of art or with “piece of nature” – such moments of slow-paced moderation and contemplation should be viewed as cherished opportunities to regain our sense of beauty and trust in life, of personal growth, meaningful life and harmony with others.

Endurance and resilience, of the individual and the community alike, are of crucial importance in times of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity): They are moreover “guardians of sanity” in a distinctively competitive, materialistic, workaholic and consumerist era and in which stress and depression are becoming prevalent mental illnesses. Hence the importance of attending to the classical dictums of: “measure is best in everything” and that “to everything there is a season and time to every purpose under the heaven.” Endurance and resilience are not commodities to be bought in the market place; they should be developed and built from within: in the realms of personal autonomy, authentic and meaningful experiences, moral and spiritual inner core, intimacy with Nature, trustworthy friendship, communal sense of belonging and dialogical empathetic human relations.

Sustainable goals for development (as stated by the UN assembly):

1. Eradication of poverty
2. Wiping out hunger
3. Good health and well-being
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation infrastructure
7. Affordable green energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequality
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action

14. Marine life
15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions
17. Partnership to achieve the goal.

Finally, as educators we are addressing the boy who wishes to behold the wildflower field seen from his window; the girl who desires to go on a night hike to explore the starry skies. We are turning to the boys and girls who seek to sense material – mold it, smell it and sense the nature of things in our world; to breach the borders of screen-mediated experience in favor of real life, adapted for the child: the tiny insect, dandelions, and mounds of earth. Quoting William Blake, “To see a World in a Grain of Sand and a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour”.

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