

Fires cannot burn humanness

Report by

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Feeling the pain and the needs of our fellow fire-afflicted citizens, the General Board of HELASYTH decided, without losing precious time, starting even from the first days, to contribute, by offering psychological treatment to the children and their families. This decision was fully supported by the members of HELASYTH.

Groups, spontaneously formed and acting on their own or in cooperation with other institutions, went in a very short time, to the burnt areas of Helia, Arcadia and Evia, in order to assist the afflicted population. Armed with great experience of how to act towards such crises (earthquakes of 1999 in Athens, tragic airplane accidents and shipwrecks) and of how to manage human pain, they visited, door to door, all village people who suffered fire attacks.

The main concern of the specialists was to bring up to surface the strength of these very people. Not just to offer them support, in a way of charity, but to take care of them, by giving them the chance to tell their experience and share their difficulties; To go back to expressing any kind of feeling, since we know that, if these feelings are not expressed, they become a burden in life. On the contrary, if these feelings are externalized, they acquire a precious value for life ever after.

What was impressive in these hours of crisis was that the village inhabitants were battling for the extinction of fire, working with a community spirit, leaving aside self-interest. They were putting out the fire at the neighbor's house all of them together, fighting for the common interest and not just for their own possessions.

They supported one another in these difficult moments. This tight social bond, which either preexisted, or came to the surface through this big disaster - just saved the villages. In the places where they did not have any casualties and they had managed to keep the church and school safe from fire, symbols of great importance to them, the sense of pride and strength was full in the air for what they had experienced. They were not feeling miserable. They had not lost their humanness. They emitted a sense of nobleness, they were friendly, and they wanted to treat us.

In the villages where there was mourning for victims, the mood was definitely very heavy. Tired of the "swarm" of reporters and TV networks, especially during the first days, when they hadn't yet buried their dead, they were sending the message "leave us alone! To cry by ourselves"!

The people who had left their homes needed also to deal with their feelings. These were the people who accused themselves for not being able to beat their fear and protect their houses from burning.

The people of mountain villages had never announced themselves as ecologists. They expressed though a deep ecological conscience. The forest was more important to them than their house. "Better to have my house burnt, not the forest" they were saying over and over again.

The members of the expedition tell a lot of stories. One of the most characteristic is the story of the women who were working in the village of Ancient Olympia. They actually abandoned their houses that were in danger in order to put out the fire at the Museum. The same thing happened when the fireman who, when he knew that his house was in fire, said to his two sons, 14 and 16 years old: "You take over the house. I'll stay here (in the forest)". I saw both children, beautiful and modest; they were not the

kind of children who boast. They had such a beauty, feeling content for having saved their house. The father was feeling proud of his sons and the sons proud of their father.

The thing though that was really impressive was Mitsos, "the Albanian", -this is how his fellow villagers called him. He didn't have a house of his own, he lived on rent, but he put out the fire in at least 15 houses. He ran and offered help, this man who didn't own a house, who would not obtain any compensation, just because "he doesn't have the right".

The citizens who stood by their neighbors, didn't just save the houses of the neighbors, but they were the ones who placed some quality in the future relations among fellow villagers, since they saved the sense of community.

Inhabitants who fought with fire face to face, who didn't run away, were the ones who would have a good life later. Not only they would not suffer from trauma, but also would have the mental resources to deal with other difficulties in life.

The breaking of individuality and the highlighting of the human face; The defeat of nihilistic competition and the blossom of togetherness; The participation in the common human fate; Life beyond needs and instincts; Heroism in time of peace; Spirituality that affirms the earthly; The recycling of human kindness; Beauty that grows within pain.

Those who deal with public concerns, having no other dreams but to promote themselves, definitely live in the most tragic insecurity. But those who have purpose and look beyond their personal interest never feel unappreciated: The volunteer who takes care of the sick, who stands by the elder, who takes care of families of children with special needs, who supports the immigrants, gets away from misery and the meaningless chase for pleasure and learns from the wisdom of patience. He invests time and energy in the service for afflicted people and gains from their wisdom. Looking for the inconceivable of illness and death, he gropes for his personal answer for the meaning of life.

Real love, real tenderness, real beauty, real sacrifice, real heroism, real joy do not shout. They don't make any noise. They are like the sound of the leaves or the water ripple of a little river. They do not come forth. They have to deal with internal processes which only the great artists can reach with a music note or by focusing the camera lens on a glance. They are not announced. They are being created in the process of life. They cannot be reported. In order to reach them you have to participate and not superficially observe.

Coming back from the afflicted areas, the members of groups feel content and happy. A joy which is the internal feeling that says: "I've gone well, I did my best" not because they needed me, not because it was nice -actually things were very bad- but because you feel an internal satisfaction for sharing human elements, meeting authentic people.

You think about your meaning of life and, consequently, there is the feeling of a secret joy; even though we haven't changed the world, we have not quitted from being active.

Experiencing pain creates antibodies for the rest of your life, makes you more humble in a sense that you realize your limits. You learn to choose between the important and the less important.

When people participate and care for other people's misery, learn to deal with pain, they transform it into wisdom. That's why children of the village who have experienced funerals can cope much better with death than the people in big towns, e.g. Athens, who everybody lives in his own misery, in his own pain, illness and, in the end, all these turn to distress.

The effort of the groups goes on, on a regular basis, since a cooperation has already been established, with school principals, parents' associations, and local authorities of the fire-afflicted areas, which is going to last at least until the end of the academic year.