

## Awareness and Disengagement: Steps to Understanding Human Ecology

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Human ecology links together people and their environments, as well as process and structure, and space, energy, and time. The very connectedness in human ecology is such that a person may be like a fish in water, entirely unaware of the surroundings and connections, and be therefore unable to contemplate the existence of the water or of what life may be like outside the boundaries posed by the water. Becoming aware of ecological connectedness may depend upon a failure or breach of relationships, such that alienation, accident, or problems emerge, sufficient to create a conscious, physical, or social shock. To continue the analogy, only when a fish is out of water, does the fish become aware of the value of water. When things do not work out for people, then it seems more likely that individuals may "wake" up and then be able to understand ecology and relationships. They may become more able to realize that changes in given human relationships are possible. One such possibility occurs when awareness leads to a disengaging process within a given ecological arrangement, and that may in turn enhance further self-insight and greater awareness and subsequent system and ecological change as well.

### Case Study

Consider the formation of families. A person develops friendships with other persons, perhaps either gradually or suddenly, and eventually a sexual relationship may occur between two people, such that a family results. The process leads initially to a two-person system, within a physical, and social, environment. Eventually children may be added, and sometimes too other members of extended families may join. In any case, the family and relationships serve to unite the members. If and when problems in the relationship occur, then the members may become more aware, and may contemplate dissolution of the relationship. That in turn may enhance

awareness of ecology.

The case presented is that of a couple, and on the surface, one of them has a problem with alcohol. In reality, both have a problem.

"It's only a short way home," she said. "I will drive carefully, so don't worry."

Nothing was said about the amount of alcohol already consumed, nothing was said about the issue of and dangers of drink driving. But the verbal statements were no longer needed. Couples do develop unspoken languages. The rationalization about driving the short distance was simple and straightforward. Just one of many similar statements, the instance was quickly forgotten, as life went on its merry way. Indeed, she had no troubles driving home. They arrived safely and soundly.

However, this instance and the remarks of his spouse puzzled Dave (a pseudonym), and after a few days of thinking about the incident, the event continued to bother him. He asked himself, "Why is she so cavalier about driving after drinking? More to the point, why do I go along with such behavior? Why are her words and her behavior so at variance?" Later he asked himself, again, and since no answers were forthcoming, once again. No answers appeared, though cognitive dissonance increased.

An alcoholic marriage is built on just such rationalizations, the delusional explanations of what is obviously crazy behavior, as well as on words that at best, fail to relate to reality. Underlying all is the protection of a spouse, and the self, one's own self, from the blunt and open and candid realization and brutal, ugly, recognition that alcoholism not only exists, but is the problem.

Dave knew as well as his spouse knew that she had drunk sufficient alcohol so that she could not and would not pass a road side blood alcohol test if one were conducted by the police. They both knew that she was not capable of driving rationally and intelligently. Her reaction time would be slowed, her judgement impaired, and



her overall driving ability questionable at best. Yet he, as well as she, excused her behavior, arguing each to themselves and without speaking to each other, that "it is just a little way."

### Becoming Aware

With some prompting, help and encouragement, Dave eventually admitted to himself that he went along with such behavior because he was truly involved in an alcoholic marriage. He realized with that admission to himself that he had given up his own claim to rational behavior. His spouse denied that her behavior was irrational, and certainly she continued to claim that her drinking was under control. She said that she did not have an accident, besides such things as laws against drunk driving were arbitrary and few people even cared.

"So what," she would say, ignoring and denying and confusing others about her own addiction to alcohol. Dave's admission to himself that the marriage was based on an alcoholic relationship was a first, and very basic step. Until that time, he had hidden that information over, denied its meaning, ignored the reality.

Further, Dave quickly came to a second realization, namely that the words of his spouse were geared towards achieving one objective, one clear and ever present goal. Whatever else anyone might say, this one objective was firm. That mission was, to control her situation so that she could continue to drink, day after day, without any questions being raised, without any possibilities being created that might interfere with her drinking. This was the central issue, but her words were cleverly designed to protect and hide that fundamental fact, to throw others off the scent, to disguise, to deny, so she could continue without interruption, her daily consumption of alcohol.

The addiction was as complete as the necessity to eat food each day. In fact, the addiction was even stronger for if given a choice, she would choose alcohol over food. That is, she would choose alcohol if one could calculate that such behavior had any element of choice. Addiction is addiction, and there is no real choice. Given such a drive, all else in life becomes interpreted within that narrowed framework. Yet, given the social opprobrium attached to drink-

ing, the life she led had to obscure the addiction. And her words, geared entirely to protecting her need to drink, were thrown out dramatically, theatrically, emotionally, deceptively, honestly, or whatever it took - and thus the gradual slide took place. Years later, Dave "woke" up, realizing that the slide had been years in the making, subtle along the way, and yet now, the accumulated evidence was clear.

"Why didn't I do something earlier on?" he asked himself. When he became aware, he felt guilt, acute guilt and pain. Many other questions bothered him too. "What do I do about this situation now?" he wondered.

### Learning to Disengage

Learning to disengage is a complex task, and particularly so after many years of living a life of delusion. *Folie a deux* is a delusion recognized by psychiatrists and psychologists that takes over two people, who reinforce the delusion for and with each other. Living with an alcoholic spouse has some of the same aspects, perhaps not quite so intense, perhaps at times, even more powerful an experience.

An initial step to create a major change is to become aware of just such a problem. Awareness brings a possibility of learning more, then creates cognitive dissonance, then slowly, inevitably raises the desire to act, to do something to right what is now seen as a wrong. Withdrawal from the marriage through a vacation, temporary separation, retreat, or other separation for at least a temporary time can work as well, for the time away creates a different environment, and the subsequent return brings recognition that all is not well, that alternative ways to live are possible. In fact, the notion begins to haunt that alternative ways to live are absolutely essential.

Another possible route is to gain counseling and therapy (Satir, 1972, 1983). If the counselor or therapist is skilled, and conversant of the special problems created in alcoholic marriages, success may be just around the corner. But many therapists are not fully aware of the pressures and strains inherent in a relationship heavily influenced by alcohol.

Still another step, which could be helpful whether or not one is undergoing counseling, is to join with those others who have similar



problems, such as by attending Al Anon meetings. Through Al Anon or alternatively, local libraries, information about living with an alcoholic is available. The number of pamphlets, leaflets, articles, journals and books is enormous. Attending Al Anon or making this discovery of the vast literature about alcoholism leads to the realization that many others have similar problems in living with alcoholics, and is helpful, for one at least feels less isolated.

Al Anon is particularly helpful. The serenity prayer, the insightful messages, the 12 step program, and the membership are all valuable to those who are trying to live with an alcoholic. Listening to the stories told by others at Al Anon meetings quickly brings about a focus on the self, the key issues of anxiety, control, rejection, detachment, denial, relationships, and so on.

Together these steps can add up to a determination to act, to do something so that life does not continue in the same way. Whether separation, divorce, pushing or better, encouraging the alcoholic person to join Alcoholics Anonymous, enabling the alcoholic person to seek treatment in a rehabilitation center, or simply finding contentment in other aspects of one's life while remaining in the partnership are options, each valid and useful, depending upon other circumstances.

Remaining tolerant, denying the problem, ignoring the pain and hurt, are simply ways to continue the delusion and are not recommended. Yet others cannot act for the person, indeed, persons, so involved. This abandonment of a meaningful life and acceptance of a pseudo-life may be the only option for a few, but represents a sad commentary on the person and the society that toler-

ates such solutions.

### Implications for Human Ecology

Through alienation, tragedy, accidents, disability, and problems, people become more aware of their relationships to others and to their environments. This greater awareness and impetus to find an alternative provides an opportunity to recognize that the goodness of fit between some person and their ecological arrangement, is poor. Once they become aware, people can choose to disengage or remain, to seek tangible alternatives or to adjust, albeit with greater appreciation and awareness of human ecology. Changes are possible, and the roads are wide, if and when issues, such as that presented in the case study above, are faced and recognized. In summary, awareness of self and of human ecology depends upon alienation and disengaging with routines and so-called normality.

**KEY WORDS** Awareness. Disengagement. Human Ecology. Alcoholism.

**ABSTRACT** Human ecology links together people and their environments. A case study of a family is presented, along with discussion of a problem, alcoholism, that develops in many families and that creates awareness of not only the problem, but also the relationship. Greater awareness can lead in turn to disengaging from a given social system or ecological arrangement, or other types of change, which in turn can lead to a meta-level or better understanding of ecology and the self.

### REFERENCES

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