

Mending the inner landscape of all South Africans

I THINK South Africans need therapy...all of us. Wherever we work, whether it's with students, teachers or community organisers, there are constant requests for skills and more skills... leadership, organisational, communication, mediation or negotiation. So much so that I'm beginning to wonder whether we shouldn't be hearing a more fundamental request... 'please help ME'.

'Please help me to feel better about myself, to feel as if I am worthwhile, that I can hold my own. Help me to stop feeling scared and angry and hopeless...as though nothing will work out no matter what we do.'

People may not be saying that, but it's what I sense when a friend goes on a six-month 'rage' against whites and women, when people arm themselves, when teachers come to school drunk and students fail another year, when people say we must listen and then shout down an opposing point of view.

It's easy to identify the problems and come up with the cause: apartheid. We can name the policies, structures and attitudes that have been entrenched by apartheid. But have we done an internal audit and looked at the psychological cost, the crippling mental and spiritual disabilities caused by apartheid and the years of equally racist English and Dutch colonial rule?

What are the psychological effects of years of being treated as non-persons, of being beaten up because you are black, of having half an hour to pack up your home, of the frustration of wanting to learn but knowing that the schooling is second-rate, of suppressing or living with your guilt if you are white, of fearing for your life because you 'have' and somebody else 'has not', of feeling a stranger in your own country. The list goes on.

Unless we open up and deal with the inner landscape, addressing the economic and political topography won't be enough. What's the point of designing wonderful bodywork, developing a new chassis, if the engine continues to leak oil?

If we don't know how to deal with our anger, our inherent racism and sexism and our fears and experiences of rejection, and change the destructive messages that we continually send ourselves, it is going to be so much harder to be good leaders, good mediators, good negotiators and good organisers. How can we talk about tolerance or peace or working together when inside we are all such a mess?

This country needs deep inner healing of the spirit. The

churches talk about it but how much are they are doing about it, in a pastoral sense? In white suburbs, group therapy life-skills courses are bursting at the seams with people in search of 'meaningful relationships' and comfort from the horror of car hijackings. The price of these courses, however, makes them the preserve of the rich (or relatively well-off).

If basic life-skills courses were made available to communities without the financial means, wouldn't that also be a form of redistribution of wealth, an investment in personal empowerment which is where all empowerment starts?

Imagine the impact of self-esteem courses on residents of informal housing settlements, demotivated teachers, frustrated students, retrenched workers and victims of violence.

In his book *The Road Less Travelled*, M. Scott Peck refers to the dynamic interplay between the individual and society when he says that a healthy person creates a healthy society and a healthy society creates a healthy person. Health, or wholeness, doesn't happen overnight, but in the journey towards it we have to wrestle with our sense of victimhood with honesty and with responsibility, for ourselves and others.

Empowerment is both a personal and political issue. An active democracy depends on a strong civil society, which depends on participation, which depends on people taking their own and other people's rights seriously. A strong sense of self is vital if we are to move from the positions of either apathy or resistance into a pro-active mode that is required for restructuring at every level.

Maybe the many life-skills trainers out there could seriously start looking at how they can offer their services to a far broader community. Where they don't have access to, or credibility with, communities they could team up with organisations or structures who do. This could take the form of training of trainers, making their resources available at affordable fees,

considering a volunteer component to their work or subsidising their community work by charging higher fees to those who can afford it. There are probably other options.

The emphasis of almost every life-skills course is to make the connection between the individual and the community, with the aim of building a healthy society. It would be sad – and ironic – if money was the factor that kept this 'health service' out of the reach of most South Africans.

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By ALICE COETZEE

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