

## Jump the Pond

Every one was raised in a particular pond: Their home, their community. And in that pond, the fish tend to look alike and swim in schools of similar fish. The pond becomes familiar; it is what the person knows. It is the sum of their experience. It is their *normal*, even if polluted.

My parents were snowbirds; retired Canadians who flew to warmer climates for the winter. They wintered in California. Yearly, for many years I would fly into Los Angeles, pick up a rental car and drive to Palm Springs to visit. Flying into LA was like flying into a dirty toilet bowl. There was a brown ring of pollution that hung around the city. I have a mild allergy and within ten minutes of disembarking, my eyes would begin to itch and my throat would become scratchy. I would pick up my luggage and head on over to the car rental counter. By the time I reached the counter, I would be sneezing and wheezing from the pollution. I would look the clerk in the eye and pointedly ask, how can you stand that pollution. The clerk would look at me puzzled and say, what pollution?

People growing up in LA have a higher risk of respiratory disease for no other reason than living there. Most do not realize it. They won't know it until diagnosed with a respiratory illness. It is otherwise, their *normal*. I often wondered, if you took someone from LA and dropped them off in say, Iowa – corn country, would they notice the sweet smell of the air? Would it cause them to look differently at LA if they were to return home?

People come to counselling in distress. Their distress may be presented as an individual issue such as depression or anxiety. Alternately, they may be looking at sorting out a relationship issue with a difficult family member. As the history of the problem unveils, the therapist learns of the family dysfunction related to abuse, domestic violence and/or parental alcoholism. The abuse may have taken the form of verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual and/or neglect. The therapist quickly learns that the pond the person has grown up in was remarkably polluted by these factors. However, like the clerk in LA, the person is totally unaware that the toxic soup he or she has been exposed to, is the root

cause of his or her distress. The person is seeking counselling to, in a sense, feel better while continuing to live in a toxic soup.

For all the tea in China, there are those folks for whom the toxicity of their pond will be unremitting. There may be no way to find peace or happiness still being subject to the ravages of alcoholism, violence, abuse and neglect. A trip away, may be in order.

When presented in this manner to a person affected this way, it may come as quite a surprise. They may not be ready to accept that their *normal* was anything but and contributory to their distress. Further, the person may feel either remarkably dependent upon the fish in his or her pond, or alternately may feel responsible for the care of the other fish. Either way, they feel stuck. Certainly he or she has never really ventured out of their pond. These persons have extrapolated from their experience and have a belief system that suggests that given their pond is *normal*, then life everywhere else on earth is the same.

The challenge when living in a polluted pond that contributes to your distress may not be necessarily changing your self to cope to continue living amongst the muck. That you are distressed may be a good sign that there is a reasonable disharmony where your body is signaling you to get out of the pond, beyond your awareness of the toxins therein.

All the therapy in the world may not be able to help this individual live harmoniously and happily in a polluted pond. The challenge then is not living within, but living without. The challenge may require cutting the ties that bind and seeking out other ponds; learning about life with other fish and learning, that like in Iowa, the air is sweet.

It may be time to jump the pond.

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