

A CONCEPT AHEAD OF ITS TIME

Michael Eales

Skyros Holistic Holidays emerged from the great flowering of Humanistic Psychology in the late seventies. Like many new developments at that time it had serious thinking behind it – a philosophy. The intent was to create a total living experience which could transform consciousness and lead to changes that benefit both the individual and society. A new community is created every fortnight by the staff and participants, living out the philosophy that personal fulfilment requires the satisfaction of all human needs – emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual and physical as well as those created in our relation, or lack of it, with our community and the environment. The concept of holism draws on ancient Greek philosophy, which brought together reason and morality, intellect and feeling, body and spirit, culture and nature, science and intuition, individuality and the public realm. This is ethically rooted in nature's Justice which acknowledges limits and interdependencies that transcend us all, and which became the basis of democracy and the modern concept of human rights. Co-founder Yannis Andricopoulos described Skyros as being 'attached to this ethical understanding of holism like a sunflower to the sun'.

The holistic focus of Skyros means that it cannot be viewed as a hotel with groups and courses. The context is always the community – a symbolic community that encourages members to be and become what they wish rather than accepting a disempowering control system. The community is held by structures to enhance safety. Community Meeting, Co-listening, and Oekos (Home) Groups provide simple lines of communication, give space to be heard, support to people's drive to fulfil their potential and a sense of common purpose. Small work groups, where participants contribute a short period of time each day to community tasks, help people feel a part of the Skyros process rather than passive participants of a service.

The courses are the centrepiece, attracting top international facilitators. It is one of those few places where

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you can still work in a humanistic way where courses have not become either over corporatised or spiritualised or part of 'training'. Last year I was reviewing my own work life, working as a full time facilitator for 20 years. I began reminiscing about the 'old days', working on the HPRG programme at Surrey University, facilitating the IDHP Diploma and all the fantastic ground breaking courses that were on offer all over the country. The political climate has changed. Universities largely abandoned 'adult education' programmes, businesses became focussed on 'return on investment', many people wanted training in counselling as a means to make money and change careers - the sense of trust in the transformative effects of personal development began to become less foreground. I realised that Skyros had become a beacon for me, as one of those places that personal development is still truly valued. I realised the joy and freedom I felt each year as a Skyros facilitator. This is also because the focus of the courses is not 'work' but creativity and fun. Skyros is after all a holiday, with beautiful natural locations, good food, singing and dancing, and the presence of the culture and history of Greece and Thailand – with a daily opportunity to voice our appreciations for the natural and human treasures around us. I realised I felt so passionate about it that I have since become the General Manager!

In 1998, during his tenure as president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, set the goal of moving the focus of psychology from taking people from minus five to zero i.e. from a negative to a neutral state of mind, to one which takes people from anywhere up to zero plus five. This was the birth of the Positive Psychology movement – also dubbed the Science of Happiness. It believes that psychology should look at the enabling conditions that make human beings flourish, described by Seligman as 'a vibrant and muscular fitness of the human mind and spirit' rather than the absence of pain.

In order to reach the goal of happiness their research findings point to: getting more pleasure out of life, particularly in sensory experience; connecting more with other people; finding ways of making your life more meaningful; taking care of your body; getting good sleep and rest; smiling and laughing; developing new strategies for stress and hardship.

No wonder participants come away so happy, as Skyros has been creating the 'enabling conditions' throughout the last 25 years. And in my opinion it is the philosophical underpinning, developed and fine tuned through experiential practice that makes this work. In the fast paced, alienating and stressful world of the 21st century the Skyros Concept is needed even more.