

A personal path towards anthroposophic psychotherapy and the task of teaching in Latin America

Interview with Ad Dekkers and Henriette Dekkers-Appel

Below is the transcript of the interview conducted with the anthroposophic psychotherapists Ad Dekkers and Henriette Dekkers-Appel - teachers in charge of Colombia Psychotherapy training. The interview was conducted at the closing of IPMT Colombia 2023, on October 22, 2023, in Tuluá (Valle). The interview took place at the training place at the La Umbría Retreat House.

Karin Biedermann (Chile) and Estefanía Hurtado (Colombia), both students of anthroposophic psychotherapy training, accompanied in the translation.

Carlos Guío (Interviewer): What was the personal path that led you to encounter anthroposophic psychotherapy?

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: We two had a son who was four years old and went to school. In the first school he always fell asleep every morning. We thought that perhaps we had made a mistake in choosing that particular school. He said: Why do I have to go to school? We changed schools for him, and in that new school he learned intellectual things. In one year he had already learned everything intellectual, and we thought again that it was the wrong school. Someone suggested that we go to a Waldorf school. From there everything started.

At the Waldorf school our son felt at home, he played, he grew, he developed, and that was the door to anthroposophy for us...

Ad Dekkers: And then I was already a psychotherapist, and I began to look for where there was a teaching on anthroposophic psychotherapy. I wrote a letter to Bernard Lievegoed expressing my interest in training in anthroposophic psychotherapy, "there is something" I told myself. He answered me, but told me that there was only a study group of psychiatrists. I joined that group, and over the years that group transformed into an anthroposophic psychotherapy group.

For three years, every day, at noon, we did group work in anthroposophic psychotherapy.

And Bernard Lievegoed said: "Well, I'm going to work with you, but when we finish you have to create your own Association of Anthroposophical Psychotherapy", so that the Association of Anthroposophical Psychotherapists of Holland is the oldest in the world, the first.

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: Bernard Lievegoed said: "You still have to do training in the future"

Ad Dekkers: It's been 40 years now.

Interviewer: How was your work as psychotherapists enriched by your encounter with anthroposophy?

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: My first patient, a woman who was referred to me by an anthroposophic doctor, was in a prepsychotic condition. The anthroposophic doctor told me: "I trust in you." That doctor sent an assistant doctor, so that when the patient threatened that she was having a psychotic break, the doctor gave her a 10 cc injection of Plumbum . This patient

wanted to work in psychotherapy sessions on her youthful dreams, which she had never talked about with anyone. In one of these sessions when she began to tell about this, she began to enter a prepsychotic state, and the doctor gave her the Plumbum injection. Then I could see how the soul and spirit returned – in 10 minutes! That made me think: “spirit, soul, body, biography... what a wealth it is to be able to integrate all this in psychotherapy.

Every time I involve that I in therapy, which is the eternal strength of the person, then a patient is always strengthened to be able to see their problems. And that was a great enrichment.

Interviewer: And for Ad?

Ad Dekkers: Well... there were different paths because at the beginning there was no description, no translation from anthroposophy to anthroposophic psychotherapy.

So in each therapy the question arose, How are we going to do this from an anthroposophic psychotherapy perspective? In this way, little by little, it was transformed, but it lasted a long time. And that was one thing, but another thing also arose...

Lievegoed said that an emergency intervention was needed for the development of the I through the spiritual. And so it was that he attended to many victims of sects, because being a victim of a sect is a type of accident on the spiritual path.

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: Ad studied Steiner as a base. Steiner repeatedly pointed out the fact of not taking his indications dogmatically but as hypotheses, and testing the truth of his statements in daily work.

Ad Dekkers: The question was how to transform anthroposophical knowledge into experiential truth. So I took each sentence of Steiner asking myself: How can one transform this into an experience? This is the reason why there are all those exercises that I do and that we use in professional training ¹.

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: It's a method

Interviewer: What place does the practice of an inner discipline occupy within the training and professional practice of an anthroposophic psychotherapist?

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: I am going to answer in three ways in which we can act when we want to take care of our inner development. Rudolf Steiner gave many examples and practices to develop our thinking, feeling and will. And one of the most important exercises for me was training perception. For example, taking something very simple, an object, and asking questions about it. And if you have observed an object and you close your eyes to make an image of it, that is, a memory in the form of an image, it is very important to realize that in a certain way your personality, your constitution *modifies that image* . That is a very small example of a practice of self-knowledge, a true meditation.

Then there are other meditations. You take an meditation which is important for your personal development, for your professional development. For example, I practiced the Foundation Stone Meditation for years, in order to have a better understanding of the human body, the human soul, and the human spirit. This is the first way, the individual way.

¹The book Psychotherapy of Human Dignity, written by Ad Dekkers, condenses the exercises developed by the author over more than 40 years of work, in order to put anthroposophical concepts into practice in psychotherapeutic work.

But in working with colleagues, you gain depth if you have a common meditation. That depends on the moment in which the organization or institution is. For example, if you are concentrating on the I, you take a meditation or a verse that reflects what you are doing, and then you can have a sense of spiritual reality.

A third way to self-development is for one to know the path of human biography and ask questions about it. Rudolf Steiner gave us very specific instructions about what happens in the first septenium, in the second septenium, in the third septenium, etc., and he gives us specific questions and exercises that we can do in each septenium. That is a modality that we can use for self-knowledge on the anthroposophic path objectively and subjectively.

Ad Dekkers: Let's start with perception and observation. On the one hand we have perception and observation carried out as precisely as possible, with all the details. And on the other side we have independently the study of anthroposophy. It can be through the path of knowledge or through the path of meditation, both are possible. So when you do this combination of knowledge on the one hand and perception on the other, when they meet, you know what to do or you have an idea of what you have to do. That's something like living in the spirit.

I believe that this is one of the ways, and then when you have an idea of what you have to do, it also requires courage to give it shape. Because you don't know what the future is really going to bring and if what you are doing is right or wrong, but you have to trust what is appearing in you. This is only possible – trusting this – when you have the appropriate preparation, and in my case the Free School of Spiritual Science was very important.

Interviewer: Using the metaphor of the doctor who uses medications to treat the patient, in anthroposophic psychotherapy, what are the intervention resources or the equivalent of the medication given to the patient?

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: I can only answer this question in a differentiated way. It is not a simple answer.

For example, if in my diagnosis I see that my patient has no memories, then I try to find out as much as possible about this patient's history and “mirror” his memories. It is a method in which the patient can understand himself through the reflection of his memories. Gradually the patient can identify with his own I.

In another example, if I am working with an obsessive-compulsive patient, I know from my professional knowledge that the feeling is in a certain way “broken”, and this generates a lot of anxiety, and additionally the will is corrupted. Everything that happens in the patient is happening at the level of thought. There are some instruments to develop the life of the soul – not by painting, that is, not with an artistic intervention – and then gradually moving towards the development of will and courage. So the triformation of the human being, that is, the neurosensory system, the rhythmic system and the metabolic-motor system, or thinking, feeling and will, we can bring them to movement. It should belong to the competence of the therapist to discern the different dimensions and differentiations of the individual patient's will. If that is the case, the patient feels reflected in his (yet) subconscious levels of karmic Will, and might wake up to an inner echoing of the path he has to follow in his life. See the world, feel the world, and walk your own autobiographical path.

Interviewer: What place does the interdisciplinary work occupy in the process of doing psychotherapy?

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: A big part. I think it is important to give a practical example. There are many people today who complain of having muscle tension. Many people complain that they feel unbalanced. There is a wide offer of all types of training today: embodying, grounding, jogging, different types of sports, anything. But the uncertainty does not go away, the muscular tensions return. It is part of our current culture. But from the anthroposophical perspective we can know that these people do not live in their physical body. They cannot permeate with their soul all the qualities of their physical body. In reality, stress is not reduced when we do “grounding exercises.” Trauma, which negatively impacts your body, does not decrease when you practice “empathy for your body” – of which body mindfulness is an example. These are all neurosensory practices. And then we have, on the other hand, anthroposophical body therapies that help us bring back the soul and the I, who have to operate in the body. They bring them home to do their homework and it becomes a vital instrument. That's where psychotherapy has to stop.

If these bodytherapies work, they make memories emerge. The body carries the memory and it is somehow released by anthroposophic physical therapies. You can provide psychotherapeutic support, the patient can be accompanied with medications. They are all absolutely necessary together.

As soon as a patient tells me “I'm doing mindfulness for my trauma,” I tell them “God bless you.” I see him the next month, and in fact the following month I find that the complaint still continues, it has not changed.

Ad Dekkers: I want to add something new, because I have a different type of professional life. I totally agree with doing interdisciplinary work. But many years ago I had a conversation with a psychiatrist. I told him: “You have medical training, and you know how far you can go with your medications. And I am a psychotherapist and I also want to know how far I can go with psychotherapy alone, even in schizophrenia.”

I have always been looking for the limits of the effectiveness of psychotherapy, because one of the problems of psychotherapy is its effectiveness. Because when you look at psychotherapy you could say that many modalities of psychotherapy are not effective. That was always a question for me: What is really effective? It is for any psychotherapist crucial to learn in the course of his professional career: what kind of interventions are fruitful and have a transforming influence upon the patient? I have learned not to be satisfied, just because the patient feels in a good mood after the sessions – but basically nothing has really changed. We all know those patients, who come back next week, having completely forgotten all we have discussed and dealt with, and bringing in a myriad of acute new events and sufferings. However, once an intervention has been effective, you can notice a significant and profound transformation in the core of the patient. Like the young patient, after hearing the deeper meaning of the stepmother's dreadful and destructive actions upon Snow-white's Thinking, Feeling and Will, suddenly understood her own destructive Borderline mother and felt equipped and strengthened to counteract the false assaults of her.

Interviewer: You are people who have been teaching psychotherapists for many years (decades). Psychotherapy training involves large groups, very intense work hours, there is a lot of inner movement in people, and it is my experience in these nine years that you have accompanied us in training in Colombia, that you have ever the energy, the disposition, the presence to accompany us to all. What is the secret?

Henriette Dekkers Appel: Basically the love of people. Absolutely.

Secondly, I always feel disappointed when people at any age and in any culture are attacked in their personality. That moves me a lot.

I ask myself: What happened on the path of personal, individual development, when for example there are attachment disorders, cultural problems, collective traumatization or something like that. In me is this inner impulse to restore that, not the symptoms. Of course the symptoms are important, the pain and all that, but the golden thread is to restore as much of the inner spark as possible, the inner value and the capacity for inner future perspective of this person. That the person feels enthusiasm for their own future.

On the other hand, you can only achieve this with any group when you start by getting to know the people. You cannot have the same conference or the same training environment in Hungary or in Germany. In these environments – we know it, they think we are crazy – and therefore teaching must be much more intellectualized, much more academic. And it's hard to take that fire, and that's what Ad does, light that fire. So, in the work of teaching I turn to the intellect. The exercise begins with intellectual teaching, but then it must be made practical. In this “doing”, the will is involved. It is a non-stop process. Sometimes it can be a battle, but it creates heat, it creates excitement, and because of this a community is created. There are different forms of experience, but all in community.

Finally, I think that we have received all these understandings about the human being from the work of Rudolf Steiner and therefore we must develop a sense of responsibility and say to ourselves: “this is what I do with your work.” Anthroposophy is not a supermarket where one takes things indiscriminately. It seems but it is not. It is an inner fire that has to be realized in the world. It can take years. Personally, I feel very happy when someone in a group, after a year of having been in a silent attitude, at the end of a practical exercise during training, such as the group exercise we did during psychotherapy training this year, in which each person went through the different regions of the dream, upon returning from the region of the will he spontaneously says: “I made the decision and I want to certify it.” I think something happened there. I don't say anything, but I think “this is a miracle.” That gives me joy.

Ad Dekkers: I want to add something and that is that I never seek to be duplicated or imitated. I organize the teaching in such a way that everyone has their own experience. And so you have responsibility for your own experience and the consequences of your own experiences. In this way the student becomes morally independent of me. I remember Bernard Lievegoed, of course. He did not give us an exact way to do psychotherapy. He gave us the space to be ourselves. He taught us at a higher level. I don't expect a student to become like me.

Henriette Dekkers- Appel : Ad says something very important: absolute freedom.

Ad Dekkers: The problem is that this is very difficult.

Interviewer: For nine years now that you have been coming to Colombia to carry out training activities, what is your perception of the needs and challenges that anthroposophic psychotherapists have to face in Colombia and perhaps in Latin America?

Henriette Dekkers- Appel: In some ways it is a difficult question because in the first IPMT (2015-2029) we only had 4 or 5 psychotherapists from Colombia, and the bulk of the group were psychotherapists from Chile and Argentina, and we necessarily compared with them.

Argentines are hyper-intellectualized, and in a certain sense there is an arrogant, critical attitude, one could say that they are in a certain way very European. If you compare this with the people

of Colombia there is a lot of unpredictability, Colombians are very open, eager to know, the heart dominates, and because of this the memory is not so sharp, the memory is not so precise as to be able to say “we have this, we had that...”, so my conclusion was this: the heart is always overwhelmed. It can be seen in dancing, in dance - which is part of Colombian culture - that the will is very flexible by nature, that is, as soon as you listen to music you start dancing, you can't stay seated. The movement dominates in a flexible way.

My first impression was that in Colombia thinking was much further behind than feeling and will, speaking of a directed will, not a joyful will.

I thought that in the case of Colombia, we should develop a teaching method in which feelings could intervene more, that could be more sensitive. From there students could reach the intellectual.

The other thing that I have perceived in Colombia, much more than in Chile, Argentina and Ecuador, is the faith in the Catholic religion. An unrestricted faith, without judgment. That to me is unthinkable. There is an uncritical belief in the Catholic faith. Catholic dogma states that one has a soul, and that this soul must be made as pure, as sacred, as possible. One day the devil may come to take you to hell because of your sins, but if you go to the priest and say “Mea culpa, mea culpa” suddenly you are fine and can sit next to God for all eternity. This means that there is no karma, that there is no I. Seeing this in Colombian culture was a surprise to me, but I said to myself: “well... it is what it is.” And what do we do with evil? Because in Colombia there is a lot of evil: paramilitaries, guerrillas, social violence, political corruption, drug trafficking, etc. Ironically, the Catholic Church holds you individually responsible for the fact that you stole an apple, or told lies to your teacher. That's not evil. But in the face of true evil you simply say “mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa”, you do a penance and you are clean. There is no judgement.

Then I thought: “It doesn't matter, here are psychotherapists, and psychotherapists can and must judge correctly and differentiate between good and evil. “They need the ability to make a judgment.” In such a way that we teach everything we can so that the ability to formulate a judgment is strengthened in us. This is very important.

It is a path that is taken step by step. This year, for the first time in psychotherapy training, we worked on the biography completely, because we saw the Disney movie “Coco”, and in it Miguel (the protagonist) is trying to realize his biography, his destiny, despite the fact that his entire family is trying to prevent it from making its way. In this movie one notices miraculously the real battle between the old traditions and values of the family, and the development in mankind to become an individuality. The transgenerational traditions fight a bitter battle against the necessity of the development of destiny, of the karma of the individual. It requires patience and tact of the psychotherapist, not to move forward too fast. Breaking with your family is only then a road to be (temporarily) taken, when the family constellation is inflicting severe mental or psychosomatic illnesses upon the patient. In such cases the entanglement in the family system has a toxic effect.

Some people escape in gaming, others in gambling, in alcohol, Netflix, or drugs. All these escapes have a “cold” **effect upon our heart forces, our human warmth, our human community**. Take for example cocaine.. We're going to talk about it next year. Cocaine kills your heart, it's cold, it has no compassion, it's hard and evil. This creates a current of selfishness where anxiety seemingly fades away. This is the enemy of Colombia, because Colombia is a population of the heart. This is the country's horrible double. In Colombia there is not as much Hashish as in Europe, Afghanistan has opioids. In Colombia it is cocaine. This is the reality of Colombia.

The FARC began with the heart, with a social ideal, that is the heart, and they ended up betraying the heart.

Ad Dekkers: I want to add something about South America. In South America there is a lot of natural sensitivity, a natural ability to make connections. That is a capacity that we are losing in Europe right now, the capacity to be spontaneous. This is very important for psychotherapy, to have this sensitivity.

There is also the natural ability to connect with the earth here in South America.

That is one of the aspects. And on the other hand there is the biographical chaos, because it is so spontaneous that sometimes everything is becoming disorganized. It's like in the novel of Gabriel García Márquez, you wouldn't know what to say to a character in "One Hundred Years of Solitude". The first idea should be to tell a story instead of separating all the elements. I believe that this means that thinking is not doing its task, because thinking should strike a balance between feeling and will.

And there is also this need to better grasp the idea of the I, because the I is the one that is giving us direction.

The Catholic Church has had a huge influence on the ideas we have of the I, because Catholicism certainly does not tell you that you have to develop your own personality.

So I think that in South America there is an advantage that has to do with sensitivity, but the problem is finding a way to be autonomous, independent and responsible at the same time. When you are autonomous and independent you take responsibility for things and that is a long road.

Estefanía Hurtado: If you can say only one thing to any Colombian or Latin American psychotherapist, what would it be?

Henriette Dekkers-Appel: Compassion for patients who have been traumatized, because it is difficult to feel the pain of patients who have been traumatized.

Second, ask yourself serious questions: How come we have so many victimizers in Colombia? That is a deeply practical spiritual inquiry question. Why does the human being become a victimizer? We have many victimizers: in drugs, in macroculture, in marriages. As anthroposophic psychotherapists we must find the reason why there are so many victimizers.

When you develop compassion for the victimizer, you break the pattern that keeps the victimizer housed in your country. That is a great task for anthroposophic psychotherapy in Colombia.

Ad Dekkers: I think it's important to develop compassion for both the victim and the victimizer, for both of them. Feel responsibility for both one and the other. Doing evil is also a problem.

About the authors:

Ad Dekkers



Psychologist and psychotherapist. Private clinical practice in Holland. He has extensive international work as a teacher trainer in the field of psychology and anthroposophically oriented psychotherapy. Coordinator of the Dutch training course in anthroposophically oriented psychotherapy. He has been working in the field of psychiatry since 1969. Between 1990 and 2003 he worked at the anthroposophic psychiatric hospital Bernard Lievegoed Klinik. He is an expert in the methodology of therapeutic encounters; specialized in the treatment of cult victims. He is the author of several books on the subject of anthroposophically oriented psychotherapy. His book "Psychotherapy of Human Dignity" has been translated into Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese and Russian.



Henriette Dekkers-Appel

Clinical psychologist. Since 1990 she has worked as a clinical psychologist at the Haarlem Therapeuticum Clinic in the Netherlands. Since 2003 she has been training psychologists and doctors in postgraduate programs in anthroposophy and psychotherapy in the Netherlands and

in other countries around the world. She has worked as a consultant for the Dutch Ministry of Justice on prison rehabilitation programs. From 1995 to 2005 she worked at the Borg Foundation's anthroposophical clinic. She has published several books in the field of anthroposophically oriented psychology and psychotherapy, some of which have been translated into Spanish. Her publications include: "Borderline: Borderline Personality Disorder," "Embodiment and Attachment in the Early Years," "Diagnosing Human Biography on the Basis of Anthroposophical Understanding of the Human Being," and "Dynamics of Constitutional Disposition." ».