

BOOK NOTES

On Ecological Medicine

Kenny Ausubel and J.P. Harpignies, (eds.), *Ecological Medicine: Healing the Earth, Healing Ourselves (Bioneers Series)*, Sierra Club Books, 2004, 248 pages.

As a Bioneers member myself, I was especially pleased when asked to review this particular volume, a collection of 30 essays written by members of the organization and edited by its founder, Kenny Ausubel. The essays are divided into six sections ranging from “Ecological Medicine: One Notion, Indivisible” (how cute!) through “Nature, Culture, and Medicine” to “Healing the Spirit.” These are preceded by a very short foreword by Andrew Weil and an introduction by Ausubel in which he gives an overview of what ecological medicine is, why it is necessary, and the benefits that it could bring to both the earth and her peoples, explaining that

Ecological medicine shifts the emphasis from the individual to public health; from nutrition to the food web and farming systems; from a human-centered viewpoint to one of biodiversity and all the other ecosystem services that are the foundations of health and healthy economies. It is founded in the precautionary principle, and it calls for a new social contract with both the human family and the web of life. [p. xv]

But, if employed with conscience and determination, vision and respect, ecological medical holds the promise of being able to achieve much greater goals. Its success might help lessen the stranglehold of the medical world by the pharmaceutical multinationals, retard somewhat the globalization steamroller, and—who knows—perhaps even help in eventually redistributing some of the world’s wealth. This volume, however, deals with none of these issues, and thus falls considerably short of both its own potential and its readers’ expectations. While it offers a lot of generalized, rather superficial, statements about what we should or shouldn’t be doing in the realm of medicine, there is almost no practical, down-to-earth, hands-on advice for the reader who, inspired by these new ideas, might like to participate more actively in the field. For a grassroots organization, this is a very top-down attitude.

An equally important criticism is that the book never directly addresses ecological medicine’s two major problems: First, that in order to participate in ecological medicine, people need to be educated enough to understand its benefits both to themselves and to the planet’s ecosystems. Second, they must be financially solvent enough to afford such participation. Indeed, references to the world’s disenfranchised—certainly the group which most needs these alternatives to allopathy—are tangential at best, and there are no references at all to the need to educate the masses in order that they, too, may take part in and benefit from this movement. Not even the chapter by Ted Schettler entitled “Reconciling Human Rights, Public Health and the Web of Life” does more than nod briefly in the direction of “support for those who are less fortunate” [p. 74] and “the empowerment of disenfranchised people” [p. 75]. In the book’s very first essay, Ausubel states that “alternative medicine is arguably the single largest progressive social movement of our era” [p. 10] and goes on to quote Michael Lerner’s words: “...environmental health could well emerge as the central human rights issue of our age” [p. 11]. And yet, given the absence throughout the book of references to the world’s poor, one is left to wonder, progressive social movement and human rights for whom?

The only two chapters that do address these issues directly are Martha Arguello’s “Putting Precaution on the Street” and Diana Ruiz’s “Globalizing Indigenous Resistance.” In her essay, Arguello

writes about grassroots efforts to educate low-income communities and communities of color to the dangers of the commercial pesticides used in their neighborhoods and some of the alternatives that these communities have developed. Ruiz discusses the exploitation of indigenous peoples by multinational corporations using cyanide and mercury in gold mining and reports on the ways in which some local groups in Peru have educated themselves about the dangers to which they are being exposed and how they have banded together to protect themselves.

The book ends with a call to action (somewhat of a distillation of the material in the essays themselves) and a valuable list of resources (books, organizations, websites, articles, and periodicals) for further research.

In addition to the issues already noted, the book is pervaded by an uncomfortable air of smugness; indeed, at times it seems embarrassingly self-congratulatory. As a teacher of eco-comp, I am always on the lookout for possible new texts; this, however, is definitely not one that I would choose to use. In fact, I'm not sure who might find the volume worthwhile, nor even why it was produced, other than possibly as a showcase for the writings of a handful of already well-known Bioneers members. In the Introduction, Ausubel comments that this volume "launches the maiden voyage in a Bioneers series" [p. xi]. Let us hope that any such future collections are better rigged, more sturdily built, and able to provide smoother sailing.

—Jeri Pollock