

# TREES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO MENTAL HEALTH<sup>1</sup>

by David G. Starkey

If I were to shrink my topic down to one sentence, that sentence would read: Man requires trees and associated plants to assist him in maintaining a healthy mental state. I venture to say that not many people in this room would disagree with this statement. In fact, I'll bet that most of us have said basically the same thing to many people in many different ways for many years.

The key word in that statement is *requires*. I could have said Man likes . . . , Man wants . . . , or Man appreciates . . . , however, the only word that precisely defines it is *requires*.

The concept that I have just stated is met with something less than whole-hearted enthusiasm from the public. A few accept it, more reject it out-of-hand, and the large majority view it with considerable skepticism. The responses range from Yes, trees certainly are nice to have if one can afford them. However . . . All across the spectrum to . . . Naturally you would say I need trees. After all, you make your living from trees. They are right. Neither I, nor most of you, qualify as an objective commentator on the status trees should have in the urban community.

Recently, however, a prominent Toronto psychiatrist delivered an address that said virtually the same thing that many of us have been saying for years. This big difference is that this man is not associated with any area related to arboriculture, horticulture, or any of the auxiliary sciences in this field. This man's field is man's mind and personality, and the various forms of mental illness that affect a number of people. He is concerned with the factors that cause these sicknesses and the various means by which they can be alleviated or mental health may be restored.

Dr. Basil Orchard possesses impressive credentials here in Canada. He is a forensic psychiatrist at the Clark Institute of Psychiatry. The Clark Institute is regarded as possibly the top

facility in Canada in this field. Dr. Orchard is also an assistant professor in psychiatry at the University of Toronto. In addition, he is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons (Canada). Finally, he is a member of the Board of Governors of the Ontario Medical Association. Dr. Orchard is prominent in the legal aspects of psychiatry, teaches in one of the top universities on this continent, has received the highest honor that his peers can bestow on him, and in addition, has been selected to function on the governing body of the medical profession in Ontario.

The paper entitled *People need trees* was first presented by Dr. Orchard at the annual meeting of the Ontario Shade Tree Council held in March 1976 in Oshawa, Ontario. The second delivery of the same paper occurred at the Ontario Recreation Society's Educational Conference held in Toronto in January of this year.

I shall review the main points put forward by Dr. Orchard.

The human requires a wide variety of stimuli to maintain a healthy state and to function properly. Deprivation of stimuli, or narrowing the range of stimuli, leads to stress, and in fact, extreme cases can induce psychotic states of varying degrees.

Man has lived intimately with trees for thousands of years. For much of mankind, these trees and associated plants form a background reference framework within which man lived his life. These living symbols have become a necessary psychological as well as a physical factor in his life. As the largest and most impressive plant, trees have a high profile. Consciously or unconsciously, they have strong personal associations with individual people.

For some, trees are frightening. Their size and height are over-powering, especially when in groups or forests. For many others, they convey warmth, hospitality, protection, serenity, and the

<sup>1</sup>Presented at the annual convention of the International Society of Arboriculture in Toronto, Ontario, Canada in August of 1978.

ability to endure adversity and survive. They serve as a powerful living example of continuity and stable growth in the relatively unstable and changing world that man faces.

People do not consciously say to themselves I need trees to maintain my mental health. However, they do many things that indicate the way they feel. Let me illustrate this attitude. In new housing developments, owners usually landscape and plant trees before finishing the recreation room, often even before the interior decorating is finished. Park personnel have been aware for years that the most heavily used passive park areas are the ones having the largest population of the largest trees. Consider the weekend vacation migration. Why do these sane ordinary people endure the time, aggravation, expense, and on occasion, the danger that goes hand-in-hand with the weekend in the country, at the store, in the mountains, or away from the city?

I submit to you that these people, without being able to identify or label their need, are fleeing from something, to something they need badly. They are fleeing from the orderly monotonous regularity of our streets, our straight lines of similar houses, our cement walled canyons, and the rising-falling but ever present cacophony of traffic noise. What are they fleeing to? I submit that they need to get closer to the diversity of nature. They are looking for the uncountable forms in which trees grow, with the orderly competition, their individual survival or destruction, but continued survival of the species.

Recently, for the first time a prominent professional, trained and experienced in evaluating and working with man's psychological needs, has publicly said that trees are not a frill. Trees are a vital factor in man's mental health. There is a strong possibility that research into this area will develop a potent tool in the treatment or prevention of mental illness. The results of this research could have immense impact in promoting increased activity in all areas related to arboriculture. It could place arboriculture in its logical and proper place in regard to public and private budgeting priorities. It would be a powerful argument in

defending against that common, widely-held concept that when budget cuts must be made, cut arboriculture expenditures to the bone.

**A resolution** I present for your consideration reads as follows:

Whereas the profession of arboriculture in North America is significantly limited due to a shortage of public and private funding;

And whereas, this situation arises because the urban, suburban, and rural tree population is considered to be a desirable amenity and not a matter of significant need;

And whereas certain prominent psychiatrists have indicated that man has a deep emotional and psychological need for trees in his environment;

And whereas there is research material available concerning this need, that requires examination and evaluation;

And whereas the above research in this field may be of great benefit to the general public and practicing professionals, treating mental illness;

And whereas this research may result in significant financial benefit to the members of I.S.A.; therefore be it resolved:

That the International Society of Arboriculture shall undertake a research program into this matter, utilizing both I.S.A. research funds and funds from other sources as may be made available;

Further that, on completion of research into the contents of the available bibliography, the I.S.A. executive shall evaluate the results of this research, its impact on I.S.A. and the advisability of proceeding further;

Further that providing that the results of this research are not negative to the aims and purposes of I.S.A., an ongoing expanded research program shall be undertaken. This program to draw data from all available sources, to be conducted by competent persons in the field of psychiatry, and funding sought from various bodies and organizations who would have a direct interest in the results of this research.

*Parks and Recreation  
Borough of North York  
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