

A View of the Relationship between Therapy and Spirituality

(June – Nov 2013)

Alain de Botton wrote an article (BACP May 2013) on how therapists might become our modern secular priests. I wrote a letter saying that I thought that we therapists needed to take on board the philosophical implications of this role and be as clear as we can be about what our philosophy is. I then found myself facing my own words and thought I had better do just that, make clear what my philosophy was, update my own 'map'.

What I've seen in my clients and myself, is that suffering is lessened and transformed when we can face it, when we can make it into an object, investigate it, let our awareness of it develop, accept it and understand it. As Gibran (1926/80 p.61) put it, "our pain is the braking of the shell that encloses our understanding". Obviously this is by no means usually a simple process and much may need to be attended to in order for there to be enough self-support for it to happen.

Simplified, we are composed of head, heart and body and we need to consciously build the connections between these parts of ourselves (which trauma in its very widest sense, split apart) in order to build this self-support. We need to know more about what we feel, to strengthen and clarifying our thinking and to become more sensitive to how our bodies and breath, including how we hold our tensions, and / or lethargy, arising from our insecurity.

This view of human health sees our ability to have strong and fluid connections between our head, heart and body as fundamental to building a healthy self-regulating person (Gurdjieff, Perls/Goodman). With strong connections the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts, we can have more presence, more fluidity in moving between 'doing' and 'being', we are more able to get our needs met and to live increasingly satisfying and creative lives. Here we know what we feel, what we need, we are clear about what is possible and what is meaningful, our body is part of us, supporting our embodied place in the world.

The work of making these connections in therapy prepares the ground, it enables us to know ourselves better and creates the space where we can allow ourselves to see deeper into the reality of ourselves, our 'what is'. From this seeing, from this new awareness and digested understanding, change follows. This is the "Paradoxical theory of Change" (Beisser 1970) in action. Although (as below) choice, responsibility and commitment are essential ingredients, it is not our 'doing' that changes us. It is the largely sub/un-conscious force towards wholeness and health within ourselves and within life itself that controls this process of change. This is Perls, Hefferline & Goodman's (PHG) (1951) "organismic self-regulation". By facing and understanding and accepting how we function and what we are, our need for our defensive structures are slowly dismantled and change occurs. Developmental change flows naturally from new awareness being integrated into our understanding. This is a profoundly radical perspective which goes against so many of our socially conditioned reflexes that arise from our insecurity around having to improve ourselves, having 'to do', or be this or that, in order to be accepted or loved. PHG (1951) and De Mello (1990) wonderfully articulated how awareness itself has this profound ability to change us.

This is why therapy, and indeed living any "examined life", is an ongoing process of questioning and seeing what is motivating us, at ever deeper levels. To me, getting to the bottom of our insecurity is a herculean, and indeed a hero's task for most of us. If, as we spiral around each cycle of our lives we deepen our awareness of ourselves, then change happens and we become freer. We automatically integrate and make sense of the information that awareness brings because we are meaning making

machines (Wheeler 2006), something it seems that is a deeply embedded aspect of the nature of our consciousness (Goswami 1995).

This is about the huge innate wisdom of the self, how our “organismic self-regulation” allows the emergence of the next ‘issue’ that we need to deal with at any particular moment. The figure just forms as by magic, we don’t decide the agenda, we just have to deal with what we find ourselves faced with. This wisdom of our ‘sub/unconscious’ only allows into our awareness what we can cope with, because as many have said, we would go mad if we saw the reality of ourselves all at once. What Perls (1951) saw was that the emergencies that were repressed and subsequently constantly held out of awareness, i.e. the “unfinished business” of our past is always pushing for resolution and this is part of the conflict we constantly live with. This wisdom is always there (Laing saw it even in madness), and while survival is the self’s first objective, growth and development are its agenda and the strong force deep within us that is struggling towards reconciliation and wholeness. This is part of the conflict that we are always living with and the implication of this, if we accept our trajectory, is of a journey towards ever greater freedom.

Part of this is the amazing innate capacity of our ‘conscience’, which as I understand it, is our ability to know what is true and what is false. Without this we would be totally lost (both personally, and as society). Often though, this all gets buried below the layers of compensatory defensive structures we create to protect ourselves from the hurt, pain, distress, shame, fear, etc. that we still find too much to bear.

PHG (1951) make it wonderfully clear how our problems are largely a result of all these compensatory processes and strategies, and the fact that we have to maintain these every moment of our lives explains why, if we are to find freedom, all we have to do is to see what is going on here and now. Our task is to always see more of how we are continually refusing our own, hurt, pain, fear distress, whatever form of suffering it is that we cannot yet face. When we can accept our own suffering, we can accept others; it doesn’t mean we don’t hurt, it is just that we can be with the suffering, conscious of it and have managed to make it into an object (Keegan 1994) which we can bear and don’t need to reject. So this journey towards the here and now is intimately connected with our journey towards being able to face suffering. It is through this that we find compassion and forgiveness for ourselves and others. The deeper that we face our suffering the less there is to fear and the more our hearts can open. This is surely Christ’s message and the meaning of his death on the cross as far as I can understand it, he faced his suffering despite his wish not to. It is also the meaning of our death, the loss of our ‘self’ in the face of death must be our ultimate suffering, and when, or if, we can accept that, we are free to simply celebrate ‘Being’ at every moment. Then there is nothing left to defend, nothing left to fear, nothing left but to surrender to the present moment.

As I see it, this process of “looking” and “facing” is a turning towards, with ownership, curiosity and determination. If for instance I am caught in ‘shoulds’, in feeling negative or fearful or hurt, then the movement to becoming aware of what is happening needs me to first want to look, then to expand my awareness by getting the support of more of the whole of me. From my head in terms of remembering my history and self-knowledge and my knowledge of the situation I am in; to attending to my feelings, being with and facing the hurt, pain, anger, distress, depression, anxiety, etc.; to noticing my body, how I’m holding my tensions and allowing a re-connection to a deeper level of sensation where I know that I am alive in this breathing body of mine. If I can do even a little of this then I am not so caught in reaction, in fear and fantasy. By making an object out of my ‘caughtness’ and seeing it, I am immediately freer, less defensive, more in touch with what is real, here and now.

As flagged above, the other aspect of all this, is that we can't face ourselves without wanting to, which is where choice and responsibility come in. In order for us to be human, choice has to be a part of our lives, otherwise we are just automatons. These are the two very different and paradoxical aspects of ourselves, 'awareness' and 'responsibility', and we are always navigating between them. The danger is that we over use one of these 'lenses' at the expense of the other. We can end up seeing the world as being all about choice and responsibility, about doing and action. Or we can see it as all about 'being', following nature, God, allowing not doing. We need both of course, as Shri Ramakrishna put it, "the winds of grace are always blowing, it is up to us to put up the sails".

But where is all this directional force of our nature, development, evolution taking us? Towards a more integrated person for sure. But still, what are the possibilities for us human beings along this path?

The work of therapy enables us to move away from the unaware forces that make us live in constant flight, fight or freeze reactions. Therapy, or other forms of work for self-knowledge, enable us to live with more awareness, choice, enjoyment and satisfaction. We know more about what we feel, what we think and how our bodies are. The more integration between these parts of ourselves, the more freedom and presence we have. The key difference here is that the freer we are from being dominated by unfinished forces coming from our past and consequent fears about the future, from essentially living in 'fantasy', in a 'dream world', the closer we can get to living our lives awake in the here and now (PHG 1951).

This is where the possibilities are enormous in terms of being able to find ever greater degrees of presence / consciousness. Our "peak experiences" (Maslow, Wilber, etc.) arise from activities that demand an integration of our head, heart and body, such as meditation, art, singing, music, movement, etc. The 'specialness' of these experiences comes from the fact that we have managed to integrate into a place of being more 'present'. This 'presence', this awareness of being alive now, is the result of this integration, however it comes about. Whether from the opening of our hearts in therapy, in art, in meeting (Buber's I-Thou), in spiritual practice through 'letting go' or connecting to 'spirit', or in nature. Or from the opening of our minds as in "aha" moments, in understanding a new whole, in encompassing opposites, in seeing our conditioning. Or from our bodies in some deepening contact with our energy and sensation. Sometime a shock, such as a death or accident can also cause this integration. The power of ideas, be they from Lao Tsu, the New Testament, Gurdjieff, Alan Watts, Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi, Eckhart Tolle, or whoever, come from the way that they help us make this qualitative step of expanding ourselves into presence. Partly by diminishing our insecurity and partly by connecting us with a deeper sense of meaning. At least temporary, we then experience an integration of heart, head and possibly body, into a fuller presence. The point is that in all these moments we become more whole and our 'being' is expanded into a fuller contact with the here and now.

The importance of giving attention to the body, to how we hold our anxieties / depressions in a physical way, was emphasised by Gestalt's founders, and is now wonderfully much more widely recognised through the work of body therapists like, Kepner (1996), Rothschild (2000), Levine (2010), amongst many others. This work of deeply sensing how our bodies carry our insecurity in our tensions and our breath is wonderfully being increasingly understood as an important pathway to change.

All this is about the continuum of 'being' possible for human beings, from the distracted madness of mental illness, through our 'normal neurotic' living, towards "individuation" or "maturity", which can be seen as the completion of the "first stage of transformation" (Harvey 2013, Wilber 2006). Here we have climbed the hill of reconciling our past and breaking free of our conditioning, there is still plenty to do in terms of understanding our psychology, but the 'back of it is broken', it is a place of having

faced the very bottom of our issues so that fear is no longer our controlling motivation. As R. Masters (2004) puts it, we are then able to use whatever problems we face as “grist to the mill of our awakening”.

The “second stage” is about living increasingly from our integrated self, true to our deeper sense of meaning, need and purpose. After this there is the possibility of making the third stage of transformation, of surrendering our ‘ego’ more fully towards living in that faintly glimpsed place of embodying universal Love and Consciousness which has been described by mystics throughout the centuries. Both Harvey (2013) and Wilber (2006) use this well established three stage model (Wilber uses many researchers multiple “levels of consciousness” but divides them into “three tiers”) and both point out that we are also often working on two or even all three of these “stages” simultaneously.

Mystics, teachers, sages and saints down the ages have shown and continue to show what the possibilities for our development are, through their ability to live ever more deeply in the here and now, through their embodied presence, love and deep acceptance. Many “gurus” have found their partialness brutally exposed, but this does not mean we need to “chuck the baby out with the bathwater”, it just means that they needed more therapy and are examples of the dangers of uneven development. (Kornfield 2000)

From working on myself and with my clients, it is clear to me that anybody’s ‘here and now’ is a multi-layered, multi-dimensional event. With time and attention and practice we can see some of this. The surface is full of current reactions, wishes, etc. around our current environment. Below that might be issues relating to what happened earlier in the day, or what is coming up next. Below that might be wider concerns relating to ongoing issues about money or our relationships. Dig deeper and we might find anxieties and frustration and anger. Deeper still we start to come to those historical structures of the self connected to our insecurity. Deeper still and we might sense how our insecurity is in the tensions we have in our body and we might even be able to really see and accept what is really driving us to be the way we are, here in this moment, now.

The fascinating aspect of this, is that when we are able to get right down there, there is often release and reconciliation and a movement into being able to just ‘be’. For that moment at least, the forces that keep us split apart are accepted, we are integrated and therefore freer to just be our deeper more natural, less conflicted, selves, alive in the here and now.

Being open and in contact with the present moment is an extra-ordinary place to live, however relative the experience is and however we manage to get there. The particular ‘flavour’ of the experience can also vary depending on how head, or heart, or body orientated it is. From a slightly different perspective Wilber calls these the “three faces of God” from his three basic perspectives of “I, We and It”. So, there is the spirituality of the mind (head) which is more about consciousness, the self-aware “I”, about the reconciliation of paradoxes and opposites, about how we are so intimately connected to everything and all is only as it can be, right now. Then heart spirituality, the “Thou” which is more about opening our hearts, about love, about the felt presence of, and relationship to, the divine, how “you are me and I am you”, Buber’s “I-Thou”. Then the “It” form, which can be seen as body focused spirituality, the experience of deep sensation, breath and energy, and about the wonder and awe of nature and the universe. Obviously all three interrelate and affect each other, plus any two, or all three, can also be experienced together.

“Presence” is often the head and body combining, (as in what is fashionably called “mindfulness”) but this place can be cold and detached, with feelings repressed. The heart and body can combine into ecstatic experience, but then the head can be desperately needed. The head and heart can combine

with understanding and compassion, but the experience be ungrounded without the embodied reality that the connection with the body brings. So all three are needed for fully integrated experience.

With all these experiences, and especially when all three aspects are working together, there is a sense of 'return', there is relief from our usual incessant internal conflict into a deeper acceptance of ourselves, the other, and the world. It can be a place free from fear and full of silence, a place where our heart is full and open and our bodies alive with energy. Such experiences are a glimpse into what is possible.

The Eastern spiritual traditions especially are clear about how 'enlightenment' can only ever be right now. This present moment, is the only place where this 'well' of consciousness and the divine exist. It is clear to me that what keeps us separate from this, is our insecurity, our projection onto the past or future, our fear, our need to give our resources and attention to maintaining our avoidance of the 'emergencies' that we have not yet been able face in ourselves. This is about waking up from our dreamlike living in 'fantasy', it is about "re-memembering ourselves" (Gurdjieff).

At the same time developmentally the way towards living ever closer to the here and now is through maturing and working to remove our insecurities. With practice, therapy, or work of whatever sort to open and integrate our heart, head and body, we can improve these connections and deepen our self-awareness. This inevitably involves the work of self-repair and growing up, as above.

Here we are back to the paradox between being and doing. Obviously trying to 'do' 'being', does not make sense, and yet living through this paradox is an inevitably aspect of our journey from unconscious sleep, to conscious sleep, to trying to awaken, to simply living now, in 'being'. To arrive at clarity and simplicity we can't escape living through messy stages full of contradictions. Wilber (2006) talks about this in terms of how the journey is both about "waking up" and "growing up". We can wake up temporarily wherever we are developmentally, but as we develop and mature through the "levels of consciousness" we live permanently closer to the here and now and waking up becomes an ever smaller step.

It seems to me that those of an evangelical bent are hooked, like addicts, on the experience of "waking up" and have not yet leaned that this is only part of the journey. The result is that they are condemned to being disappointed or 'exposed' as hypocrites because their waking up can only be transient. They will inevitably return the neurotic aspects of themselves with the shame and self-loathing that that entails.

Therapists are reflecting this widening awareness of what is possible and are acting as *guides* for this "first stage of transformation", i.e. of finding freedom from our past, through integrating both Eastern and Western, experiential, psychological, philosophical and bodily awareness traditions into a new whole. To talk about therapists becoming societies "priests" though, in the sense of being guides to realising the full possibilities of human development, is obviously too much to ask. Maybe in this post post-modern world we don't need to 'follow' anyone once we are free of our past, all knowledge is 'out there' these days and each can find their own path up the mountain if they want to. Yet de Botton's plea still has a resonance in the sense that most people are far from accepting that adult development is real, practical and on some level even a responsibility. "Waking up" and "growing up" are active lifelong processes for us all if we choose to accept the challenge. So, whilst therapists are slowly being accepted as 'guides' for helping people to live more satisfying lives, there is still a long way to go for society at large to move from its post-modern anti-essentialist atheism towards embracing a developmental perspective.

Wilber (2006) also discussed the interesting possibility of established religions again becoming forces of growth for the human soul rather than being the constraints he sees them as at present. This is about the possibility of religions taking on board, at the experiential level, how the difference between the spiritual and the therapeutic barely exists at times (as De Mello so wonderfully demonstrated). Cynthia Bourgeault (2008) has shown how the profound depth of spiritual experience and challenge that Jesus provides, is very much about the development of our consciousness which is of necessity both a psychological and spiritual process. Here there is the possibility of a meeting between religion, therapy, and the developmental, that Paul Smith argues for in "Integral Christianity" (2012).

It seems that this universe we are part of, is a cosmic experiment that started with the Big Bang and has arrived here, with us relatively conscious humans. We contain all this history within us, from the sub-atomic and formation of the elements (the star dust we are composed of is the result of multiple star forming and dying cycles), through to the whole history of life on earth contained in our genes. This evolutionary path of increasing complexity and consciousness (Goswami 1995, Davies 2006, Primark & Abrams 2006, Morris 2003), is plainly not without meaning. Maybe the ancient Hindus had it about right and God is creating the universe so as to be able to see itself in form. What I find so extraordinary is how the here and now seems to contain this force of creation. When we connect to it, however faintly or fleetingly, it is as though a different level of life touches us and we connect with a different quality of being.

The experience of meaning that comes through awareness and development is not random. "Organismic self-regulation" (PHG), "The Paradoxical Theory of Change" (Beisser), the experience of moving into the here and now and our development over time, all inexorably point towards there being some sort of absolute of "Love"/"Consciousness"/"Energy", that is the force behind the evolution of the universe as well as within each of us as it structures our journey. This is not about belief, it is about experience and the logic of these experiences ... of that which is beyond logic.

The postmodern philosophers raised awareness of the relativity of everything and destroyed the derelict remnants of essentialism and belief. But what they failed to understand, in their emphasis on our intersubjectivity, is that, as we move out of the prison of our conditioning there is a process of self-development which takes us, through levels of being, towards greater freedom (Rowan 2006). As we become more self-aware we become less subjective, less entirely dominated by our un-aware reactivity and our conditioning. We then we move into being increasingly governed by processes connected to developmental pathways that are rooted in the evolution of Consciousness and Love, rather than the chaos and accident of "normal", "asleep" living (Gurdjieff /Ouspensky 1950).

The heart of humanistic psychology, it seems to me, is this place of deep acceptance that comes from an intuited knowledge that there is Love and Goodness and potential at the centre of our being and of life in general. It is clearly there, in the perfection of nature, and in the increasing emergence, from psychological freedom, of greater openness, acceptance, love and compassion for ourselves, the other and the world. It is there in knowing that there is no essential 'badness' or 'wrongness'. There is plenty of negativity from all our compensatory processes, but all that is simply an expression of our very human hurt, loss or distress. Fundamentally there is just Love, Consciousness and Energy (together with *choice* of course).

References

- Beisser A (in Ed. Fagan & Shepherd 1970) – The Paradoxical Theory of Change in **Gestalt Therapy Now**
– Science and Behaviour Books
- Bourgeault C (2008) - **The Wisdom Jesus** - New Seeds Books
- Davies P (2006) - **The Goldilocks Enigma** – Penguin
- De Mello A (1990 / 2002) - **Awareness** – Zondervan
- Gibran K (1926 / 1908) - **The Prophet** - Pan
- Goswami A (1995) - **The Self-Aware Universe** – Tarcher Penguin
- Harvey R. (2013) - **Your Essential Self** – Llewellyn
- Keegan R (1994) - **In Over Our Heads** – Harvard
- Kepner J I (1996 / 2003) - **Healing Tasks** – Gestalt Press
- Kornfield J (2000) - **After the Ecstasy the Laundry** - Rider
- Levine P A (2010) - **In an Unspoken Voice** – North Atlantic Books
- Master R.A. (2004) - **Divine Dynamite** – Tehmenos Press
- Morris S C (2003) - **Life's Solution** – Cambridge Press
- Ouspensky (Gurdjieff) (1950) - **In Search of the Miraculous** – Routledge & Keegan Paul
- Perls F, Hefferline R, Goodman P (1951) - **Gestalt Therapy** – The Julian Press
- Philippson P (2001) - **Self in Relation** – Gestalt Journal Press
- Primark J R & Abrams N E (2006) - **The View from the Centre of the Universe** – Riverhead
- Rothschild B (2000) - **The Body Remembers** – W. W. Norton & Co
- Rowan J. (2006) – **On Intersubjectivity** – The Int. Gestalt Journal Vol. 29 No.2
- Smith P. (2012) – **Integral Christianity** – Paragon House
- Tolle E (1999) – **The Power of Now** – Hodder & Stoughton
- Wheeler G. (2006) – **New Directions in Gestalt Therapy** – Int. Gestalt J. Vol. 29 1
- Wilber K. (2006) – **Integral Spirituality** – Integral Books

Jim Robinson
jim@jim-robinson.co.uk
www.jim-robinson.co.uk