

## An essential aspect of therapy is choice. This makes it a philosophical enquiry.

An essential aspect of therapy is choice, and this makes it a philosophical enquiry, not a scientific evidence based one. Having choice is what makes us human, it comes from the complexity and sophistication of our consciousness with its inherent ability to evaluate what is true from what is not. This is obviously a particular view of therapy, but one that I think needs emphasising in the light of our society's onward rush to objectify it and make it an "evidence based" scientific "thing".

I think that this perspective of therapy as philosophy becomes clearer as we move towards being able to consciously choose "Yes" to life, rather than remaining in our passive victim based "no" that is so often our conditioned habitual defensive pattern. Saying "Yes" consciously is a profound and highly developed ability which only usually emerges after real self-exploration to gain self-knowledge, self-forgiveness and self-understanding. When we know who is saying "yes" (or "no") to what and why.

This view has, for me, been informed by Existentialism, but more especially the way it was integrated into Gestalt Therapy by Perls with his emphasis on our need to take self-responsibility and meet and face "reality" (1994 p. 7+10). This has developed over the years for me through Victor Frankl's book "Man's Search for Meaning" (1946) and especially Jill Hall in her remarkable book "The Reluctant Adult" (1993), also more recently Edith Eger's book "The Choice" (2018). The latter is, like Frankl's, a story of survival from Auschwitz and both make so clear, that whatever our circumstances, we always have a choice about the nature of our relationship to our lives in this moment, now.

This points to how this perspective of therapy, of how choice and self-responsibility play such a crucial role, does not only come from Existentialism and psychology. More importantly I think, and as Jill Hall argues (amongst others as below), it comes from the transpersonal or "spiritual" understanding of the primacy of living ever closer to the here and now.

Obviously, our ability to choose "yes" is relative. It seems clear to me that basically it is relative to the degree to which we live under the spell of trauma. But there is also a mystery here around how despite all the complexities and forces that come from our genetics and environmental conditioning, some people are more able to choose "yes" than others.

When I look back at my earlier self, I would have vehemently denied this perspective, arguing that therapy it is all about awareness and allowing process and our natural wisdom to emerge, that it was impossible to choose. That was my experience then, I did not fully understand what was going on or why I was depressed at times and not at others, or what my role in the process was.

But now I see it differently and more clearly, and it seems to me this is important for how as a society we look at therapy and psychological healing. Being able to find our choice is a difficult developmental process. It needs us to take responsibility for ourselves at a deep level which is profoundly challenging, especially so with our modern Western life-styles and upbringings. To get past, what is at times this very difficult task of taking responsibility for ourselves, we need the "push" of being clear about what we don't want (i.e. all the pain and conflict that flows from trauma) as well as the "pull" of glimpsing the quality of living that we do want.

As I see it, this “pull” towards “Yes” can be deeply supported by our connection to the “Transpersonal” dimension of our lives. It is this that gives our intuitive recognition that freedom is possible, that it is possible to live differently, to live more deeply and nourishingly connected to life. We need to experience this draw towards our potential, to live with some connection to deeper levels of being that are profoundly rooted in “Being”, and which only exists in the depth of the “here and now”. Our motivation for this “Yes” has to come from a relatively non-egoic place within us, a place that glimpses and deeply values the expansion of consciousness and the opening of our hearts and body, that in turn comes from “remembering ourselves” in the here and now.

Our “spiritual” experience inevitably gets mixed up with our ego’s compensatory needs, as for example our narcissistic wish to be “special”. This is where we need a ruthless honesty which can only come from our conscience, which I see as simply our miraculous innate ability to tell the difference between truth and lies. This is about recognising and holding in mind that there are levels to our being, to respect this, and stay vigilant around not confusing them.

It is clear to me that most of us say “no” to life to some extent each day. I know I do. Each day there is some insecurity that is too much to cope with, there is something that we cannot bear which makes us turn away in avoidance of some sort. To not do this at all would be to live an extraordinary life, a life where the here and now is fully lived, where whatever happens is met and accepted. “Accepted”, not in a passive sense, but in an active way that was not about defeatedness. This would be living a fully reconciled life.

Many people over the centuries have found this reconciliation and shown how it represents our potential as a human being. From millennia BC right through to the present-day people have described this experience. There is a wonderful series of Chinese Zen Buddhist pictures from the eleventh century called the “The Ten Ox Heading Pictures” depicting ten stages to our development towards this potential. There is Lao-tzu’s “Tao Te Ching” (1972) from the sixth century BC. They are both talking about the same possibility, of experiencing “Being”. This understanding of the possibility of “Liberation” has largely come from the East, from Zen teachers to Alan Watts to Eckhart Tolle, from Ramana Maharshi to Krishnamurti to any number of “Non-Duality” teachers, as well as Yoga, Tai-Chi and many other “paths”. But it is there in the Abrahamic traditions as well, in the Gospels and Rumi and many others with their emphasis on Love and forgiveness and surrender. It seems to me that all the great “transpersonal” texts, ancient and modern are in essence about trying to help people to find their choice to say “Yes” to life in some way.

Wilber and his “Integral” associates are not alone in presenting this relatively new psycho-spiritual path of “Growing up and Waking up” (these terms are from Wilber). I am also aware of Claudio Naranjo, John Welwood, Hameed Ali and Richard Harvey, and many others who have been “paving the way” for this new “psycho-spiritual” perspective. They have all brought clarity around how our journey to finding freedom needs psychological repair and development, i.e. our “Growing up”, as well opening and connecting to this “Non-Dual”, “Spiritual” or “Transpersonal” ground of our being, i.e. “Waking up”. (“Growing up” and “Waking up” are terms borrowed from Wilber 2017)

The process of healing and development happens, as I see it, through the three basic ways we relate to the world of our thinking, feeling and sensation. We heal by repairing the connections between our heart, head and body that trauma split apart. We transform through opening to an ever-greater connection with Consciousness by expanding our mind,

through Love by opening our heart and through our bodies by consciously embodying our energy and breath. The fullness of our freedom both psychologically and “spiritually” depends on the degree to which we can integrate all three aspects.

Over the last century the knowledge and understanding that “psychology” has brought us, has changed our consciousness and it has provided the tools for us to heal our wounded selves. Therapy is about “removing the obstacles to Love within you”, to paraphrase Rumi (full quote below). Our trauma with its unfaced fear, hurt, pain, distress, is what constitutes the barrier between ourselves and the “here and now”, with its underlying transpersonal reality which we perceive as Consciousness, Love and Energy.

Support and challenge are the two intertwining threads of our development. We need to see and understand and forgive and have compassion for our woundedness with all its “negative” identifications. We need to repair the splits in the self that keep our head, heart and body separate. We need the wisdom that emerges from that re-integration. On the challenge side, we need to face and take self-responsibility for the reality of how we are, this is central as every addict (i.e. most of us) knows. With both support and challenge we can heal and “Grow up” and find trust and become able to choose “Yes”. No amount of self-awareness and understanding will facilitate change unless at a deep level we want or choose to change, but no amount of wish to change can work unless we have enough awareness and understanding.

It seems clear to me that all the negativity and “badness” within ourselves and others, comes from un-processed and un-faced trauma. When trauma is not faced the obstacles can be overwhelming, we can find ourselves unable to choose anything because of our inner conflict and identification with “shoulds” and blame. From here the world can seem full of negativity hammering nails into our coffins. It can take much tough work before we can even start to find our way. But a really important part of this is about distinguishing between blame and responsibility. Blame is just the projective expression of that trauma. Seeing clearly where responsibility lies and taking responsibility for ourselves, is about dealing with reality, blame is always a negative fantasy.

Going against our conscience, giving into the negative or destructive aspects of our compensatory processes can be profoundly self-destructive as well as destructive of others. The more this is done whilst at the same time, and at some level, knowing what we are doing, the more destructive it is of our soul and the deeper the hole we dig for ourselves. For a few this leads to a nightmarishly unrecoverable place and the news is obsessed with such people. But for most of us the struggle against these regressive forces emanating from our un-reconciled trauma, is ongoing. We struggle to avoid the ‘over’ control or ‘under’ control emanating from our addictions, and it is often only our fear of the unpalatable negative consequences that keep us from greater difficulties.

What I perceive as making a crucial difference here is the “pull” that comes from the deeper “spiritual” or “transpersonal” reaches of our self. This helps us to choose “Yes”, it supports our efforts to change. Our ego does not want to face and meet our “what is”, in the end we need the help of what is not our ego. This is something that “twelve-step programs” have long recognised.

It seems to me that “Growing up” naturally leads us towards “Waking up”, but this is obviously not inevitable, again it is about choice. To journey towards “Waking up” we need to want it. The prize is that we can start seeing the creative miracle of consciousness that is constantly

unfolding the universe (Goswami 1993). We can increasingly see that I am you and you are me, that “my consciousness”, “my love” and “my energy” are not “mine” but the universe’s. Where “I” witness “me” being lived in the timeless now, where being aware of Awareness, being connected to Love, embodying Energy, are all sensed as revolutionary, and radical, and essential aspects of the road to freedom.

It is through moments of connecting deeply to the “here and now” that we get glimpses of how it is possible to live, this provides us with “peak experiences”. These moments of “Waking up” then become the valued reference points of meaning in our lives. Therapy is also about making meaning, not any random meaning, but about increasingly seeing the truth of ourselves and our situation and understanding it. It is this truth that creates meaning through revealing the underlying process of healing and development that we are inexorably caught up in. Meaning and development go hand in hand. At some level, if we are to respect our deep human need for healing, for growth and freedom, it is surely our “duty” to follow those impulses. “Waking up” and “Growing up”, along with support and challenge, are the intertwining processes that enable us to find increasing freedom from our ego and to embody the Consciousness, Love and Energy at the heart of existence.

This is about the journey from being identified with the unreality of our victim based delusional “nightmares”, towards living increasingly open to the here and now, attending to “what is” in spontaneous, appropriate, creative and satisfying ways. At base, it seems, the universe is “Goodness, Beauty and Truth” (the three properties of “Being” from ancient Greek Philosophy - Wikipedia) and this is found most directly in our experience of “Being” in the depth of “here and now”. This present moment uncluttered and clouded by trauma and insecurity is continually unfolding miraculously from the unknown and un-formed.

Scientific materialism often has too narrow a view, it can be so blinkered by its own insecurity that it becomes un-scientific in its lack of holism. Choice is something that is always going to be beyond science to pin down, because it is an integral part of consciousness. The crucial role of choice is something that storytellers of all types have always been intuitively fascinated by. Our experience of conscience and choice, and the transpersonal is not un-scientific, it is all verifiable through investigating our experience, it just cannot be contained by a narrow intellectual insistence on some measurable proof.

Wilber (2006, 2017) argues that cultures / societies evolve through stages (much like individuals do). He argues that many have largely moved past magical thinking, past tribalism and past dogmatic religiosity with the more developed parts of advanced societies are getting past modernism’s obsession with over-rationality, are now even getting past our post-modernism obsession with subjectivity and relativism. At their leading edge what is starting to emerge is what Wilber calls “Integral stages” of development. People here are able to hold a wider perspective, they are not identified with a perspective as being “right or wrong”, here all is seen as the underlying process of developing consciousness. This makes me very much hope that the regulation of therapy does not force it any further down the retrograde path of hunkering down into pseudo-scientific defensive “evidence based” bunkers, full of blame-based regulation.

To me therapy needs to embrace our ultimately transpersonal nature. We need to be bold and say loudly that therapy is about philosophy and meaning and truth. That it is about removing the obstacles in the way to “Being”, and that it is about the intertwining processes of “Growing up” and “Waking up”. Our journey is towards realising our extraordinary

potential to “transcend and include” (Wilber 2017) our ego with its busy compulsive “doing”. “To be, or not to be?” (Shakespeare) is indeed the question and it takes time and effort and much self-knowledge to find our ability to say “Yes” to Being, to be able to consciously choose life over death. We can only let go of our ego if we have fully owned and healed it, but as we manage this, we can transform ourselves through increasingly opening to “Waking up”. I strongly sense that this latter process is eventually more about surrender rather than choice, but this is something that I am in the middle of exploring.

As therapists we surely have a duty to understand and embrace the whole of human nature. The more holistic we are the better. To not include the “Transpersonal” or “Being” aspect of human nature is to miss much of what can support our ability to choose “Yes” and find the amazing freedom that Life wants and needs us to embody. We are stardust, we have consciousness and conscience and therefore choice and therefore this possibility of “self-realisation”. This must surely be the ultimate expression of creation. What an experiment the Universe and Life is, the formless taking billions of years to evolve form to the point where it can consciously embody and look at itself. How extraordinary that our fragile human choice has such a crucial role in the final flowering of this process, of finally transforming Form into embodied conscious Consciousness.

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Jim Robinson is a Gestalt Psychotherapist and Supervisor in private practice in East Sussex. He is a BACP, UKAHPP and UKCP accredited Psychotherapist, with many decades of commitment to understanding the relationship between therapy and the possibility of realising our transpersonal potential. Email - [jim@jim-robinson.co.uk](mailto:jim@jim-robinson.co.uk), website – [www.jim-robinson.co.uk](http://www.jim-robinson.co.uk).