

### Psychotherapists and Other Creatures

In July I enjoyed Des Kennedy's<sup>1</sup> Marianne Fry Memorial lecture on The Importance of Being Authentic. He cited to a number of examples of courageous individuals' response to "the claim truth makes upon them." These arose out of dissent from tyranny, from Nazi Germany to Guantanamo Bay. Afterwards though, I found myself thinking that the tension between authenticity and artificiality now permeates our culture in a more diffuse way. A character in Tom Robbins's<sup>2</sup> Jitterbug Perfume laments:

"What bothers me today is the lack of, well, I guess you'd call it authentic experience. So much is a sham. So much is artificial, synthetic, watered-down and standardised. You know, less than a century ago there were sixty three varieties of lettuce in California alone. Today, there are four. And they are not the best lettuces either; not the most tasty or nutritious. They are the hybrid lettuces with built-in shelf-life, the ones that have a safe, clean, consistent look in the supermarket. It's the way with so many things, we're even standardising people, their goals, their ideas. The sham is everywhere."

Realising this, the advertising industry even attempts to market authenticity as if it were a commodity. So, Olivio television adverts offered consumers a taste of "real" Italian peasant life, and Smirnoff recently launched a new grade of vodka, "distilled very slowly in copper-pot stills and then filtered through Siberian silver-birch charcoal.... Then produced in small batches - just as it was for the Imperial Court."

In Tim Lott's<sup>3</sup> heart-wrenching and painfully honest 1996 memoir, The Scent of Dried Roses, he details the concealed, growing and intolerable tension at the heart of British culture in the late twentieth century. It was particularly evident in those who, like his own family, he describes as "subtopians", who had decamped from the inner city to the more spacious and comfortable new

estates around the edge. Ostensibly, life was improving, but an undercurrent of depression and suicide gradually emerged. What he manages to describe so vividly is the strangely neutralised, bland, synthetic nature of the society that developed. “For the Postwar Generation,” he wrote, “freedom meant freedom from, not freedom to.....”. He is utterly without scorn for his parents’ generation, and lists their many qualities, their persistence, generosity and resilience in the face of struggle. But, such was the neutrality which dominated the atmosphere, that when he first encountered genuine, raw passion – in a recorded voice, it utterly mesmerised him:

“The voice is incredible, worn, razed, and busted up, with a moan that tugs at the chest. It is a woman and she does not sing so much as drawl, in a voice stretched out and punctured and sad. I can just about make out the lyric through the pop and bustle of the stricken quality, and this, too, is strange. Out of the world I live in, which is made up of game shows and toothpaste ads and Sunday Night at the London Palladium and Alma Cogan, Helen Shapiro and Max Bygraves, I hear, it seems to me, for the first time, something that is real.

The song is “Strange Fruit”. I read the label which bears the legend ‘Billie Holliday’. I assume this must be a man. And perhaps for the first time I begin to realise, without word or conscious thought, that there are two worlds to inhabit: the ersatz and the authentic – avoidance or involvement, denial or engagement. To be lost in one is numb and to be lost in the other is to be in danger.”

One of the key features of the “ersatz” world was television:

“The new framed, packaged, spectral community magnetised people out of the dance halls and pubs and into lit front rooms with deliberately parted curtains which would display to the street the largeness of their screens,

each night, becoming more like a hearth than their log effect gas fires..... The cocooning, the particle by particle separation of England had been sparked. It would later be flamed, intensified, by, in turns, the car, the telephone, the walkman, the PC and simple fear.”

In many ways, his story is the attempt to rediscover the authentic. His mother is a dedicated parent and homebuilder. Her life appears to be well-ordered and content. Suddenly, following his own struggle with the depression that gradually invaded his adult life, she kills herself. Later, he discovers clues that suggest she actually had a history of depression, which was entirely secret.

In the inevitable reaction to this, we as therapists are merchants of authenticity – we offer the true self, real feeling, honest autonomy and genuine spirituality. But what if the artificial and false has come to permeate the very fabric within which we work? What if, along with the convenience, ease and comfort – along with flat floors, draft-proof dwellings, mechanised transport and standardised cabbages – we absorb delusion and alienation? Of course, it can be argued, mankind has for many ages struggled with illusion and had to search for truth. But the difference now is that we have never been so able to attempt insulation and protection of ourselves from the physical conditions of our planet, the vicissitudes of fate, and the proximity of other creatures. What if this is highlighted in our dealings with the non-human world, but we therapists behave in our work as if unaware of it? As Des Kennedy indicated, Merleau-Ponty<sup>4</sup> saw the body as the litmus of authenticity. Ken Wilbur<sup>5</sup> and John Rowan<sup>6</sup>, among others, echo this. And the body it is that verifies our contact with these non-human Others.

Ever since childhood, I have loved being on horseback, because the raw power of the animal, the physicality and the danger seemed to cleanse my world of pretence. Many of our recreational activities offer this kind of

satisfaction and relief, as the tension between the authentic and the artificial has increased in the age of electronic entertainment.

The hallmark of authenticity is the presence of danger. Our flight into security, which is also a loss of intimacy with the earth, induces a continuous low-level depression which we have so come to accept that it is barely noticeable. Joanna Moncrieff<sup>7</sup> has argued convincingly that depression is a “normal” result of mainstream culture in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain and that the idea of “treatment” it is a red herring. If this is true, it behoves us to recognise it in ourselves, to see if our clients experience it and to see what it tells us.

In the early pages of Contexts of Being, their powerful critique of the “Myth of the Isolated Mind” in psychoanalysis, Stolorow and Atwood<sup>8</sup> describe “Alienation from Nature” as one of its aspects. They describe a loss of recognition of our “absolute dependence on the physical environment, kinship to the other animals, subjection to biological rhythms and needs and, perhaps most important, man’s physical vulnerability and ultimate mortality.” Although the rest of the book is a thorough exploration of many aspects of human inter-connection, they say little more about alienation from nature, especially “kinship to other animals”. They share this omission with most writings on the practice of counselling and psychotherapy.

An increasing number of other writers however, many (but not all) of them outside the therapy world, are making resounding statements about this very kinship. “I think,” writes Barry Lopez<sup>9</sup> in Of Wolves and Men,” as the twentieth century comes to a close, that we are coming to an understanding of animals different from the one that has guided us for the past three hundred years. We have begun to see again, as our primitive ancestors did, that animals are neither imperfect imitations of men nor machines that can be described in terms of endocrine secretion and neural impulses.” He describes the wonders of animal play, transactions between species, and partnership bondings. Some of these writers scathingly challenge the

mankind-centeredness of human thinking. David Gray<sup>10</sup> and John Aspinall<sup>11</sup> are prime examples. Because psychotherapy has been primarily concerned with individual well-being, it can easily appear to subscribe to the kind of thinking they challenge.

Yet in a recent article in Self and Society, Clive Perraton Mountford<sup>12</sup> suggests that “Carl Rogers therapeutic conditions can be read as a recipe for a way of being with the non-human world....” And at last year’s Social Dreaming of BCPC graduates, the dream space seemed to team with non-human creatures: frogs, dogs, boar, horses (and indeed, flowers, mists and the ocean). By a strange twist, our venue was double-booked with a shamanic group, and after re-negotiation of the rooms, the sound of their drumming provided a background to the day, and a reminder of how new shamanism has arisen because it embraces our links with the animal and the elemental.

We might assume from the content of most writings on psychotherapy that for humans, relationship with animals is peripheral, for the main pre-occupation of humans is other humans. But then consider the germination of Martin Buber’s<sup>13</sup> pivotal I/Thou thesis. The inspiration came from his encounter with a horse. (Similarly, Nietzsche’s final collapse into madness was triggered by an encounter with an abused horse). Yet we at BCPC, as elsewhere, attempt to nurture the I/Thou experience in rooms filled exclusively by humankind, as if there is nothing odd about it. Like Buber, people who have learned to achieve some communication with tigers, wolves, ravens or bears all attest to what I have experienced in recent years as I pursued the art of partnership with horses; something changes inside, a door opens in the soul. Curiously, Ken Wilbur<sup>14</sup> in his writings on levels of consciousness, while saying next to nothing about our consciousness of other life forms, nevertheless dubs one of his key stages, the Centaur level, that is half horse.

If our connection, or lack of it, with animals has so much to tell us, what does this mean in the fields of training and everyday practice? I, for one, am still wondering, and would greatly welcome the thoughts of others on this, but here are a few attempts at suggestions. Firstly we should pay attention to developments like Equine Assisted Psychotherapy, which is now being offered in a number of places and with several varieties of approach. In this, individuals develop self-awareness (and apparently dramatic insights) through the way loose horses respond to them and the degree of connection and co-operation they achieve. I consider that this type of activity is at present in its early stages. Secondly, to take care as therapists that we do not, in sessions, discount or misunderstand clients contact with animals and nature in general. Our level of attention alone is a powerful intervention and it is easy to lose that which doesn't fit our preconceptions. This also applies to the occurrence of natural events in the therapy session (e.g. the arrival of insects in the therapy room). Thirdly, to bear in mind that we may continuously collude with a cultural denial of our dependence on other life forms. When a client persistently omits to mention a significant human other (partner, parent, sibling) we would consider that significant and probably draw attention to it. Yet if they omit mention of other life forms we'd probably let it go by. I now question this. I hope to return to all these points in greater detail in the future. I would argue that our connectedness with the animal world is profoundly repressed; that while the extent of this remains unrecognised, there will nevertheless be a hankering within humans for something unnamed, even if all conflicts at a strictly human level have been resolved. Soul health includes the recovery of our connection to other creatures. It would be a grave error to automatically regard connection with other creatures as a substitute for human relationships.

Even the way we use language, and with it our openness to the imagination, reflect this question. For a language without metaphor and myth is per se one of separation from other life forms. "While on the prowl, I leave no stone unturned," we say, as if taking the shape of a predator in a rugged

landscape. Indeed, the yearning for the true gold of connectedness has contributed to the revival of oral storytelling which is now widespread, and has even reached the corporate boardroom. Strangely though, the language of some therapy writers, even those who champion the cause of authentic meeting between therapist and client, has become densely conceptual. Rich Hycner's<sup>15</sup> advocacy of such meeting is profoundly genuine and heartfelt, yet many of his sentences veer in the opposite direction because of their intensely abstract language (e.g. "they have not yet articulated a comprehensive clinical theory, nor (and this is true of Gestalt therapy) a comprehensive clinical developmental understanding of human interexistence.") Child psychotherapist Margot Sunderland<sup>15</sup> has argued eloquently that "some therapists are linguistically armoured, their language completely devoid of metaphor, image, analogy. Dried up literal words for feeling states are in danger of offering the child an impoverished emotional connection." She emphasises how much this ignores many crucial findings on neurological brain functioning. The imagination and the mythic mentality are closely akin to the elemental forces, with which we can achieve partnership or alienation.

In the wild spaces of the soul, we are buffeted by the storms of ill-fortune, failure and distress, or warmed by the sunlight of benevolent providence. We seek to tame and control the beasts of destiny, to earn the co-operation of those capricious creatures, abundance and lack. I have watched outstandingly accomplished horsemen, who seem to achieve effortless, willing, calm and precise response from their animal collaborators. And I have wondered if their skill has something to tell us about meeting those other beasts.

They know that their animal is never controlled, but can be engaged in incessant conversation. There are key characteristics which they share. Intention is clear but expectation is fluid. These are offered in a way which the other understands, but the messages of the other are also heeded.

These messages are not dismissed or diminished, nor ascribed to stupidity or malice. This suggests a model of mutually fruitful and authentic relationship with the elemental other, which is authentic. This authenticity is not just an avoidance of falsehood, but the achievement of grace. It demonstrates the ability of human and fellow creature to achieve shared language and connection. It offers a way of being with all types of Other – including those within us which seem foreign when we have become unfamiliar with them. “The results of this philosophy are almost unfathomable,” writes Philip Nye<sup>17</sup>, the legendary Australian horseman, “it is inspiration to me just to know that the human spirit is capable of such perfection.”

Here I hear the rumour of a connectedness embracing what happens in us, to us, between us, and what happens between human and non-human. Now more than ever, it matters that we become that inclusive.

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1. Des Kennedy, 2006, The Importance of Being Authentic. Marianne Fry Lecture, Bristol.
2. Tom Robbins, 1998, Jitterbug Perfume. Bantam Books, New York.
3. Tim Lott, 1997, The Scent of Dried Roses. Penguin.
4. Merleau-Ponty, 1926, The Phenomenology of Perception. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
5. Ken Wilbur, 1991, No Boundary. Shambhala, Boulder & London.
6. John Rowan, 1983, The Reality Game. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
7. Joanna Moncrieff, MD. 2006, Psychiatric Imperialism: The Medicalisation of Modern Living. [www.academyanalyticalarts.org/moncrieff](http://www.academyanalyticalarts.org/moncrieff)
8. Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, Contexts of Being. The Analytic Press, Hillsdale NJ.
9. Barry Lopez, 1995, Of Wolves and Men. Touchstone, New York.
10. John Gray, 2002, Straw Dogs. Granta, London.
11. John Aspinall, 1976, The Best of Friends. Macmillan, London.
12. Clive Perraton Mountford, 2006, Dr. Rogers and the Moral Umbrella : Open-Centred Ecosophy. Self & Society, March–April 2006.
13. Martin Buber, 1929, Between Man and Man. Routledge.
14. Ken Wilbur, 1981, *ibid*.
15. Rich Hycner, 1995, The Healing Relationship in Gestalt Therapy (with Lynne Jacobs). Gestalt Journal Press.
16. Margot Sutherland, 2005, Neuroscientific Base of Intergrative Child Psychotherapy. The Psychotherapist, Winter 2005.
17. Philip Nye, 2005, Savvy News, July 2005.

**Footnote:**

This article is a preliminary attempt to explore some ideas I will be pursuing long term. Comments, however critical, are very welcome at [kelvinghall@hotmail.com](mailto:kelvinghall@hotmail.com)

**Nature as an Ally in Therapy:**

I have initiated a series of informal discussions between BCPLA members around this subject. The next will be held on Friday April 20<sup>th</sup> near Nailsworth, Glos. Please contact me for details if you are interested in participating.

**Equine Experiential Psychotherapy Day for BCPL Graduates:**

BCPL counselling graduate Miranda Carey has been training in Equine Experiential Psychotherapy with Linda Kohanor in Arizona. In this work the assistance of horses is invited, to stimulate human therapeutic processes. I am keen to participate in a day of this along with other BCPL graduates later in the year. Date to be announced, location – probably the Forest of Dean. Please contact me if you are interested on 01453 833861.\_