

## Conversations that catch fire

A Lifescape Work in Progress – August 2005

*" 'Its good to talk' is the slogan of the twentieth century, which puts its faith in self expression, sharing information and trying to be understood. But talking does not necessarily change one's own or other people's feelings or ideas. I believe the twenty-first century needs a new ambition, to develop not talk but conversation, that does change people. Real conversation catches fire. It involves more than sending and receiving information".*

**Theodore Zeldin, Conversation, 1998, Harvill Press.**

Conversations that catch fire. Here is a wonderful metaphor for the kinds of activities that we might call counselling, coaching, therapy, helping, support, pastoral care and so on. Yet as the counselling and psychotherapy industry drifts towards regulation, we could ask ourselves how such a basic human act as conversing with another is, in its 'professional' incarnation, about to be classified as if it were a clinical act akin to surgery or the prescribing of medicine. Whilst critiques of therapy cast doubt on the 'clinical' views of therapy and their roots in questionable assumptions about child development; what we do know is that it is the quality of the relationship between the helper and the helped, and the self-motivation of the client that is seen to lead to successful 'outcomes' in counselling and therapy. It's the quality of the relationship, not the style or amount of accredited therapeutic training, that can help open the conversational gateway to the soul!

Perhaps then we can combine this awareness:

- with a **theory of development** that recognises that early childhood experience is not the formative experience on personality that we believed and assumed it to be, and that a person's character or soul is, in any case, more important than their history in relation to a person's experiencing of themselves; and
- with a **theory of persons** that recognises that individuation (or becoming or self-actualisation) is a lifetime's journey that means growing towards living in the world. That is the real world of outer experience, **and** the real world of our dreams, imagination and the archetypal legacy that is the birthright of every human being (and emerges through our deepest cultural myths and metaphors);

Can we recognise, then, that counselling and therapy are at only useful if they are first acts of caring, simple helping – and only then can they carry the potential to accompany deeper explorations - providing a trusted guide for the soul's making and the soul's journey? And can we acknowledge that while both helping conversations and soul-guidance can be provided through professional helping relationships, it is not only in counselling, psychotherapy or coaching that these things occur?

If we can combine these elements and accept these assumptions, then perhaps this frees up therapy (and other types of professional dialogue) as a place in which to have the conversations that our imaginations deserve. It widens out the professional conversation to become a social, as well as a personal, act of the self. It brings into the conversation our personal experiences of body and soul; our family and social networks; our wider community and political contexts; our world. It takes counselling and therapy beyond the 'self' (a questionable and

problematic concept in both scientific and artistic viewpoints in any case) and offers the possibility of a richer metaphorical exploration of our "being in the world" - "being there" - what the existentialists sometimes call "dasein".

Adam Phillips, in an interview with the BACP<sup>1</sup> journal CPJ (April 2005) makes the case for this wider cultural placing of the therapeutic conversation:

*"I think that psychoanalysis is a symptom of despair about political life, and I think people should go via psychoanalysis back to political social life, not take refuge in it. It seems to me a very interesting cultural moment when people begin to feel they need to speak to someone who's not a religious person, nor a member of the family. I would prefer a world in which people spoke to their friends or family. I hope that psychoanalysis will help people use the resources in their social group better".*

This view was echoed for me in a recent conversation with a friend and former colleague from the education world, Dave Hicks. Dave is one of those quiet, wise men whose apparent gentleness belies a twinkle-eyed intellectual sharpness (there's an archetype for you!). He's also one of the most influential writers and thinkers in the areas of global studies and futures education<sup>2</sup>. In his office at Bath Spa University, we talked about therapy, counselling and the ways we can strive for happiness in a fractured world. Dave is respectful of therapy, the humanistic task and the psychological insights that this can bring – but he asks this of us professional helpers, who hope to make people happy and sane in an often unhappy and insane world (I paraphrase): *"where is the global dimension, where is justice, where is the future - where is the **world** in all this?"*.

### **A conversation with an old friend**

*You said that the soul was  
All very well  
But where is the world in this  
Searching?*

*Too many people  
We know have taken  
That journey and  
Returned having only  
Scaled a mountain,*

*The climb  
Above clouds  
The only task.*

*But when you've been  
Transcendent  
What then?*

*What does the world say  
About that, when its  
People are dying with  
Yearning eyes;  
When even the world  
Itself is slowly fading?*

*It says  
Fuck that for a  
Game of soldiers,  
It says  
Who do you think you are  
Marching up and down  
The hill like that?*

*It says  
(gently)  
you can only heal yourself  
If I am healed*

*It screams  
As another gash wounds it,  
And our birthright is torn*

*And we turn our backs  
Once again  
And forget your words,  
Whispered insistently:*

*"Listen to the future, it is  
The only history we can hear".*

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<sup>1</sup> British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

<sup>2</sup> Dave Hicks' website: <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/schools/education/centre-global-futures-education/>

Dave has a point. Therapy – even an archetypally-intelligent therapy of the soul - can all too easily become focussed on the searching, finding and saving of 'self' and/or on the clinical paradigms set out for us by the historical fathers of psychology (the doctors, psychiatrists and clinical psychologists), and confirmed in our present day training schools where we become clinicians, undertake assessments, diagnose clients and develop treatment plans. So where **is** the world in all this? Where is the soul? Where are the conversation and the story?

Where are the real worlds (outer and inner) with their archetypes, shadows and tricksters experienced, dreamed of and projected in love, lunacy, worship and war? Where is the liberating recognition that we are all a little mad really, and that what we recognise in our society as clinical madness is largely genetic predilection mediated by environmental and social pressures? And how on earth does that help a person **really** make sense of their world, in this so-called age of information where our minds, if not our cities and lives, are overcrowded and confused and sometimes feel like battlefields:

*This is not  
the age of information  
This is not  
the age of information*

*Forget the news  
and the radio  
and the blurred screen*

*This is the time  
of loaves  
and fishes*

*People are hungry  
and one good word is bread  
for a thousand.*

**David Whyte, from the House of Belonging, 1998, Many Rivers Press.**

If professional helping is to maintain its place as an activity in our world that helps people make meaning of their lives then it has to be more about the loaves, fishes and the good words of a conversation than the information and, dare I say it, the patching up and making people better. Striving to live in and heal our world may be, in any case, a more meaningful activity than curing or finding a self. For illness has meaning too – and if we listen to mind-body therapists like Arnie Mindell<sup>3</sup> and to those who work with people who are dying, we know that joy, meaning, understanding and richness is not just to be found in minds and bodies free of disease and madness.

So if psychotherapy is not just to be about 'getting better' (and sometimes of course it might be because the pain of the mind and the body have become unbearable), then it can be about something more. A dialogue. A meeting. A meaning. A conversation that can change lives.

This recognition that therapy and counselling are places (but not the only ones!) in which conversations can take place that change lives, means that we can begin to change the way we think about and do them:

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold Mindell is the originator of Process-Oriented Psychology – a Jungian-based therapy based on the archetypal concept of the Dream-Body. Intrigued? Start with "Working with the Dreaming Body", Penguin 1985.

*"There will now be an awareness of the need for genuine human meeting at the core of the healing process. Such openness to genuine meetings always means a willingness to encounter the unexpected, the existential unknown between persons, and leaving the security of one's own method and theory.*

*Such an approach changes the therapist's understanding of a cure. A technical cure is no longer acceptable. A therapy which ends with the client having gained great psychological insight, but unable to apply it in the real world of persons, is a therapy that has failed. It has cured not healed".*

**Richard Hycner, *Between Person and Person*, Gestalt Journal Press, 1993.**

In one way we can all be part of these kinds of conversations; yet there will still sometimes be a need for the 'professional conversationalist', willing and (hopefully) wise, who can be a soul guide, an inner-life coach, an honest friend and a catalyst for our own dialogue and conversation with ourselves and with the world.

And if in counselling or therapy (or elsewhere) we find the one conversation that is about dialogue and healing and can help us 'make' our soul; then perhaps, in this fragile, fractured world we should hang onto it for all its worth!:

*"I can see no reason why psychotherapy should ever end unless someone dies. I mean, if you come across a conversation in your life that improves the quality of it, there's no reason to end it".*

**Adam Phillips, *interview in Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal*, April 2005.**

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