The River: A Moral Tale

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A Person is walking by a river when s/he sees someone drowning. S/he jumps in, pulls them to the bank and gives them the kiss of life. Then s/he notices someone else being swept down the river so s/he jumps in, pulls them to the bank and so on. By now one or two other people have gathered on the bank and are watching as someone else comes sweeping down the river and is saved by the Person. This process continues until there are quite a few wet people recovering on the bank and a lot of bystanders watching. Someone else comes down the river drowning. This time the Person turns and walks away up-river. One of the bystanders shouts 'Where are you off to? Aren't you going to save that one too?' The Person turns and says 'No. You can save that one. I'm going to find out who's pushing them in.'

As told to us this is where the story ends. We are sorry we cannot acknow-ledge the source; it was simply passed on to us by a friend. But suppose that some-time later the Person returns downriver. Now there are many more people gath-ered on the river bank and many more people in the river sweeping past drown-ing. But the ones on the river bank are not doing much life-saving. Instead they have broken up into small groups, many of which are fighting each other or fighting amongst themselves. Quite a few people have bloody noses, there are black eyes, and loosened teeth are scattered here and there on the ground. The people are fight-ing about which are the best techniques for life-saving; whether it is ethical to save lives and if so in what circumstances; whether only certain specially qualified people should be allowed to save lives; what should be done to prevent unquali-fied people from saving lives; the problems of the possible abuse of the drowning per-son; the structure of the committees that

are needed to look into all the above is-
sues; whether life-savers have a
sufficiently strong theoretical knowledge
of the principles of life-saving; whether
only graduates should be permitted to
save lives; whether anyone should be per-
mitted to save a life until they have proved
themselves competent at putting on their
swimming trunks on two separate occa-
sions; whether the best way to save lives
is to peer intently up each others' bottoms,
and a few other important issues. One
group has named itself the British Asso-
ciation of Life-Saving and feels that only
life-savers accredited by itself should be
allowed to enter the water; it has set up
an ingenious accreditation system based
on the life-saving techniques that the
practitioner has studied but unfortunately
it has forgotten to include any test of
whether the practitioner can actually
swim. Another group has named itself the
Association of Humanistic Life-Saving
Practitioners; it is more forward-thinking
and includes in its accreditation proce-
dures the consideration of whether real
swimming can be undertaken — but alas
only on paper; no-one knows whether its
practitioners will actually sink or not
when thrown into the water.

Occasionally somebody jumps into the
river and pulls someone who is drowning
to the bank. There are mutterings of re-
sentment and criticism from the
on-lookers. Meanwhile lots of people
drown. No-one wants to listen to what the
Person has learnt up-river.

The *Self & Society* editorial of March
1994 made some telling points: 'The lan-
guage of personal growth has been
replaced with the lexicon of clinicians,
clinical training, and psychiatric diagnos-
tic systems'. And not just the language;
the mind-set and the way of being in
counselling and psychotherapy are rap-
idly going in the same direction, 'back to
the oppressive, authoritarian culture of
the head, emphasising theory and label-
ling at the expense of integration'. And
also emphasising the accreditation of
structural procedures and theoretical
knowledge rather than the growth, devel-
opment, wisdom and insight of the
practitioner.

Give us a wise therapist rather than a
knowledgeable one any day. Why do so
many training courses give their trainees
practice through role-play rather than ad-
dress the real issues of the participants?
Why do they refuse to work with the dy-
namic of the group in a deep and
challenging way? Why are the partici-
pants encouraged to take their issues
away from the group to their own thera-
pists rather than work with them in the
group as the raw material of their train-
ing? Because it's 'safer'. But it doesn't do
trainee counsellors and therapists or their
future clients any favours to be deprived
of this deep and challenging work.