

The Shame of the Therapist — Or Not

John Sivyer

Rational argument can be conducted with some prospect of success only so long as the emotionality of a given situation does not exceed a certain critical degree.

C G Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*

Over the last year there has been a lot of pertinent criticism, but also scare-mongering and general hoo-ha, in the popular press concerning malpractice, false memory syndrome and, it seems to me, possibly downright envy concerning the meaningful and intimate relationships that can develop in counselling and, in particular, in psychotherapy.

Almost every week recently, my counselling students have brought me further newspaper and magazine articles lambasting the talking therapies. Journalists, it seems, are attempting to vilify and shame us. It is argued that we counsellors/therapists use our power, the transference power that so often originates in the client (who is always portrayed in these articles as not only the distressed, but also the helpless victim) to satisfy our own egos in some abusive way. In my opinion, any ethically competent counsellor/therapist will continually be on the outlook for countertransference and at times, for a variety of reasons, miss

the signs. But to implicate, by innuendo and a few examples of bad practice, the entire professional craft of counselling, is clearly sensationalist nonsense. For sure, there is bad practice and abuse in therapy as there is in all walks of life, and it is right and proper to name that. And here I stress, important to name examples of malpractice and especially proactive as well as reactive counter-transference, but not necessarily to publicly name the accused practitioners. (Though in extreme cases of systematic and regular malpractice it surely is right to bring people to account). For, in the process of naming names we actually risk encouraging, through understandably defensive behaviour, a driving underground of that which we most want and need to curtail. In effect, we set up a Salem witch-hunt, as so powerfully written about in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Through fear, we risk making secret that which needs to be out of the closet. For some of the effects of this barrage from the popular press upon us

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all is to encourage or drive some therapists to look nervously over their shoulders, to attempt to become sterily 'squeaky clean' and take out a million pounds' worth of insurance! And the work, which so often needs to involve risqué intimacies, is rendered sterile and dead and therefore of little use. And if we continue to work in such a sterile, of little use way, whilst still receiving remuneration and accruing accolades, is that not in itself another form of abuse? Another effect, which more than ever I noticed this year in students applying to my counselling courses was their, often fear-led, need for nationally recognised qualifications. It is not the nationally recognised qualification that I object to, it is rather the assumption that goes with it, that there is a 'right way' and therefore 'wrong way' to counsel and that qualifications are the custodians of good, ethical practice. Which in turn seeks to de-personalise what is, by the nature of the craft, a very intimate and confidential relationship. And it will change the way in which we train counselling students, tending to insist, as in the NVQ system, that students gather evidence for examination rather than practising and perfecting their art.

Another effect of this criticism is a self-imposed censorship, a 'keep your head down' philosophy which fears someone somewhere will take a shot at you should you raise your head above the parapet of secrecy, conveniently disguised as confidentiality. Why is it that adventurous and open, sensitive, honest and authentic folk are singled out for attack? Is it the violence of the mob, the fascist politics of the feared herd that seeks for shelter inside the fortress of professional associations, foray-

ing out on occasions to jeer at and jostle the lone night walker, the man/woman journeying upon the road less travelled?

For often it is the fearful therapist that attacks, rather than address and face his/her own internal doubts and self-fears. Such folk have always been self-righteous extremists — the minister in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* that bound the young, explorative free spirit; the Massons of this world, that in an extreme about turn, dismiss all of therapy.

I talked of shaming earlier. The criticism of us as therapists is, in part, an attempt to shame us.

John Bradshaw, in his book *Healing The Shame That Binds Us*, describes two kinds, nourishing shame and toxic/life-destroying shame. Quoting Erik Erikson's second stage of development, autonomy versus shame, Bradshaw writes of the need for good parental modelling and clear, firm boundaries in order to develop healthy shame.

If a child can be protected by firm, but compassionate, limits, if he or she can explore, test and have tantrums without the caregiver's withdrawal of love, then that child can develop a healthy sense of shame. This sense of shame is crucial and necessary as a balance and limit for one's autonomy. Healthy shame signals us that we are not omnipotent.

This is precisely why I argue for naming the examples of poor, even abusive, counter-transferential practice rather than condemning the practitioner. Whilst there is a need for firm limits, there also needs to be a compassionate understanding without the withdrawal of the profession's love and support. The articles that my recent students have brought to

my attention demonstrate anything but love. They would burn and destroy all that we hold most dear — that therapy can be truly wonderful and both nourishing and liberating for its recipients.

In Bradshaw's terms, the vitriolic and destructive criticism we have heard of late seeks to drive us therapists/counsellors into a 'sickness of the soul'. Toxic Shame. Bradshaw writes of this; 'It divides us from ourselves and from others. In toxic shame we disown ourselves. And this disowning demands a cover-up. Toxic shame . . . loves darkness and secretiveness'.

This is the 'driving underground', the self-imposed censorship that inexorably leads to persecutory witch-hunts. In the TA Drama Triangle, the victim (often wrongly portrayed in the popular press as helpless and powerless) becomes persecutor. The popular press, in its paternalistic stance, is rescuer, champion (as in Victorian melodramas) of the distressed underdog. It encourages the victim, that until now has been turned in against itself, to become, through externalised projective identification, suddenly self-righteous, persecuting the now 'bad' therapist.

In Kleinian terms, the once 'good breast' now becomes the 'bad breast'. Unless, and until, this is worked through nothing has really changed — except that for the client, still a victim, the pain is outside in the world rather than on the inside. Whereas the distress was internal, now it is external. In TA language, the client has self-deceptively changed from 'I'm not OK, you're OK' (depressive position) to 'I'm OK, you're not OK' (paranoiac position).

As an ex-journalist, I know the press

barons couldn't give a hoot about the victims/clients that they once so 'worthily' championed. For the next day, as I was so instructed in my journalist training, 'they are not newsworthy; drop them'.

At the AHPP conference in Gaunt's House 1993, on the subject of power and its abuse, the after-effects of the media's interest in abuse seemed to be there — eyes around the room, that seemed to say, looking for abusers, 'who are you, where are you? We know you are hiding.' Some of us recognise and painfully accept that at times, inadvertently and to our own personal shame, we have been unhelpful, restrictive and guilty of abusive behaviour, and so perhaps others will seek us out in order to cleanse themselves. We are all a mixture of helpers and inhibitors, ethically appropriate therapists and counter-transferential disablers. If I cannot acknowledge that in myself, then surely I risk becoming the unknowing abuser that will undoubtedly hurt clients. I need the firmness, the critical feedback from my colleagues and clients, surrounded with compassion and with no threat of judgmental loss of acceptance, to explore my 'shadow'. In fact precisely what I ask of my own therapist.

I witnessed for myself the press's unreasoning criticism of therapy when that politician/presenter/journalist Kilroy-Silk had clearly made up his mind that therapy is abusive and would not let Judith Baron of the BAC finish her sentence, let alone develop her argument. She was shut out as effectively and powerfully as Kilroy-Silk and others accuse us therapists/counsellors of acting. For me, the challenge to us counsellors/therapists is not to close ranks, 'clean up' our act as if it needed

sanitising, but instead to stay true to ourselves, to look critically at the ways in which we practice and to support each other, acceptingly, critically and compassionately when we make mistakes. On

those occasions, we can acknowledge our part in the furtherance of a client's distress, apologise, and continue with that person until we both are freed from that shame that can bind us.

The Independent Therapists Network Founding Conference: A Personal View

Nick Totton

For me, the founding conference of the Independent Therapists Network was an enormous success — which also, necessarily, left a huge number of unanswered questions. Finding answers to them is going to be a lot of fun! But whatever happens, I think we have registered that there are many therapists and counsellors who do not consent to the programme of UKCP and BAC. I feel very grateful to everyone who responded to my original initiative; and a lot less lonely.

One of the most striking things for me was how many times I heard people say something about home — about feeling that perhaps they had found a home that they had been looking for, a home for their therapeutic identity. Other words that came up a lot were 'soul' and 'heart', and also the sense of life and death struggle.

It was a huge relief for me, and I think also for a high proportion of the sixty-odd people present, simply to be with like-minded, and highly competent, people, and to hear so many of my own feelings expressed by others: especially about the

desire to move away from the fear-filled atmosphere in which accreditation issues have been discussed for so long now: to move into a culture where trust and support — and confrontation that is based on trust and support — are central values.

It was also clear that turning these feelings into a viable network will take a good deal of work and thought. There seemed to me to be widespread agreement that structure needs to be as simple as possible, compatible with the goals of accountability and mutual visibility; also widespread agreement that the unit of membership should be a peer-accrediting group of five or more people, who are prepared to stand by each others' work in its successes and its failures; and that each group needs to have cross-links of mutual recognition with other such groups. I think it's right to say that these are now bottom line positions of the Network.

So now people have gone away to try to form such groups, or to talk about bringing groups that they already belong to into the Network. There is going to be