The Accountable Therapist

Brian Thorne

I often feel, nowadays, like a man in danger, because he has become imprisoned in the profession of therapy. Let me attempt to explain. This summer I completed 27 years as a counsellor. That is a long haul by any criterion. During that time I have experienced astonishing developments in the world of therapy and counselling in our country and in a minor way I suppose I have contributed to some of them.

When I began as a counsellor in 1968 there was no Association for Student Counselling, no British Association for Counselling, certainly no UK Standing Conference for Psychotherapy. The man whom I still regard as the greatest therapist I ever met — George Lyward of Finchden Manor — possessed no formal qualifications as a therapist. He put MA(Cantab) after his name in the conviction — wholly justified it seemed — that this would be sufficient evidence to any discerning person that he was wholly competent at the job. Nobody seemed to worry much that his Cambridge degree was in history. There were, of course, some powerful analysts around who held mysterious court in Hampstead. Those were the days of the Tavistock ascendancy and of residential weeks in pursuit of Leadership Skills. The Tavistock trained consultants, traumatised business men and academics alike with their impenetrable interpretations of group process and their abject capitulation to the second hand of their watches. But on the whole those few counsellors and therapists around had only rudimentary support systems, strange hybrid trainings and little sense of belonging to a greater body of brothers and sisters. What I remember vividly, however, was the sense of dedication and of adventure, the exhilaration of being pioneers in a new world.

Not long ago I was invited to contribute to a book entitled *On Becoming a Psychotherapist*. It confronted me with the somewhat daunting task of recalling my own training and the first months in my new and, at that time, almost unknown profession. In fact, the writing proved to be a thoroughly enlivening experience, for it put me in touch again with the motivational energy which was the driving force behind my aspirations in those days. In the first place, I did not recall being particularly excited as I set out for my training course. On the contrary, there was more a sense of being pulled somewhat against my will towards a kind of inevitable destiny. I knew that to become a counsellor meant giving up much that I loved dearly, for I was a gifted teacher

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and could have looked forward to a pretty successful career, I think, in the teaching profession. Secondly, I recall clearly my determination not to get sucked into a kind of psychological ghetto. I was keen to retain my literary and theological interests and not to lose those perspectives on reality which had underpinned my life for so long. In short, I was highly resistant to any notion of a psychological framework for human personality and human interaction which would negate my understanding of persons as *essentially mysterious beings who shared in the overarching mystery of the cosmos.* I entered lectures on psychological theories of personality fortified by Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*: 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The soul that rises with us, our life's star, hath had elsewhere its setting and cometh from afar . . . trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home.'

Fortunately for me it turned out that my training did not constitute an assault on my previously held convictions and understandings. On the contrary it deepened them, added to them and gave them a new coherence and potency. The good fortune, as I see it, was that I was being trained to be a client-centred counsellor in the tradition of Carl Rogers. As I read Rogers' books with increasing enthusiasm I realised that I was not being asked to take on board a whole new perception of reality or a highly complex theory of human personality. I was not even being required to change my basic way of being with those who sought to help. Instead, I found in Rogers someone who seemed to esteem the validity of my own experience and who gave names to attitudes and behaviours which I had falteringly attempted to embody for many years. And so it was that Carl Rogers became for me, not the new guru or source of all wisdom for the aspiring therapist, but a gentle companion who spoke of unconditional positive regard, empathy and genuineness. This gave shape to what, for me, had previously been an almost instinctive and somewhat incoherent response to others in need.

The client-centred or person-centred approach not only enabled me to retain a firm hold on my own identity, but also preserved me from arrogance and from the insidious snares of psychological powermongering. Weighty theories about personality development and complex maps of the unconscious certainly have their fascination, but they tend to make those who have studied them feel very important and erudite. Such a training would, I think, have been very bad for me, for I was only too aware that I was a powerful person and anything that might have added to that sense of power would probably have knocked my humility for six for a long time to come. In effect, I was being trained to reject the role of the expert and to become proficient at the far more delicate task of being the faithful companion. As I look back on that training experience and as I think now of my work as a trainer of person-centred therapists I have no doubt whatever that the whole enterprise is concerned with mutuality, with intimacy, with power-sharing, with transparency, with tapping into currents of love and creativity which are the essence of spiritual reality. The expertise, if that is the appropriate word, lies in the capacity (to quote Scott Peck's words) 'to

extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth'.

Over the years I have come to acknowledge that all my most challenging clients have drawn me inexorably into the same terrain. They have, in fact, challenged my ability to love. It is notable that in the vast corpus of professional literature which now exists on counselling and psychotherapy there is scant reference to this issue of love. And yet I have known for many years that, for me, offering the core conditions of acceptance, empathy and congruence, if I do so consistently and honestly, means a willingness to love my clients and the likelihood that I shall end up doing so. I would go further. My experience has convinced me that it is, in fact, essential for me to love my clients if genuine healing is to occur, and that the deeper the wound, the greater the deficiency, the more likely it is that I shall have to extend myself in love to a degree which is costly in effort and commitment. There is part of me which does not like that conclusion. There are times when I would prefer my success as a therapist to depend on my knowledge, my therapeutic skills or techniques, my experience, my years of self-exploration. But I know that I should be deluding myself in believing that. Perhaps I have now run across too many incompetent and even abusive therapists who are loaded with degrees and qualifications, or have undergone lengthy training analyses. However, love which finds its expression in 'the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth' cannot permit fusion or the falling in love which leads to all kinds of sexual complications. The love to which I refer, in fact, is very demanding in the discipline it imposes.

I must confess that I often find it difficult to see why a therapist without a belief in the potential divinisation of humanity and therefore in a divine source of power should submit himself or herself to such a discipline. It may be, however, that what I have described as the longing for the spiritual growth of another can be experienced as a profound and unselfish desire for a fellow human being to become fully human. For me this amounts to the same thing, but I can really appreciate that for many therapists the change in language is important. I am persuaded, too, but less readily, that a deep and unshakeable yearning for the fulfilment of another's humanity need not be linked to a belief in God or indeed to any religious interpretation of reality.

Having come clean about this primacy of love in the therapeutic enterprise I do not wish to be accused of naïveté or sentimentalism. Love as I mean it in this context clearly demands the most rigorous training and discipline, with levels of self-knowledge and self-acceptance which are unlikely to be attained without effort except by the most fortunate and beloved of persons. In short, I believe that counsellors need high quality training, regular and sensitive supervision and every opportunity to extend and deepen their personal and professional resources. Events of recent years, however, lead me to write these words with a heavy heart and with a persistent sense of foreboding.

Here lies the crux of the disquiet to which I referred at the beginning of this paper. Increasingly I have found myself

becoming imprisoned in a vicious circle of feverish activity as the new accountability culture permeates the world of therapy. Now, it seems, we must not only do good work but manifestly be seen to do it, and we must also seek to convince the public at large and the government in particular that we are worthy people, wholly reputable and dripping with prestigious qualifications which ensure our legitimacy and our continuing employability. Our fears are exacerbated by true stories of secret delegations haunting the corridors of power in Brussels behind the back of the UK Standing Conference and initiatives taken by the government's Training Agency.

All this is very painful for me. As long ago as 1977 I was a prime mover in establishing a rigorous procedure for accrediting student counsellors. It was my conviction that we owed it both to our clients and ourselves to aim for the highest possible standards and to challenge ourselves to become ever more open to personal and professional development. Little did I guess that only 14 years later we should find ourselves caught up in an increasingly vicious circle where accountability, appraisal, evaluation, value for money, raising standards and open competition would be buzz words. Our culture has become virtually obsessed with seeing the world through the eyes of cost accountants and other measurers of human effectiveness, where effectiveness often seems to mean the ability to persuade others to think and to do what, left to their own volition, they would never dream of thinking or doing — and to do it cheaply.

I believe that we have witnessed a political transformation in the last decade which has produced a society where more and more people are seeking the help of counsellors and therapists precisely because of the stress caused by competitiveness, constant surveillance and the fear of failure. At the same time the therapists to whom they take their concerns are themselves increasingly fussed about their legitimacy, their performance, their cost effectiveness, the approval of government or, at a more mundane level, their acceptability to insurance companies.

When someone told me that the new Archbishop of Canterbury was also into appraisal and parish audits I experienced a wave of despair which threatened to engulf me altogether. Could it be that a priest will soon be evaluated on the quality of his sermons, the beauty of his singing, the numbers in the pews, the health of his marriage? Not so, it will be argued, for such appraisal will lead to a new level of self-exploration and a real sense of caring by senior clergy for their less experienced colleagues. It was shortly after the Archbishop's reported penchant for appraisal was made public that a Diocesan Bishop and his Suffragans informed the world that they had embarked upon just such an appraisal process, and that its benefits and fruits were wondrous to contemplate. Men in the pews, too, were only too keen to point out that they in the world of business and commerce had long since been swept up into the appraisal, accountability culture and that it was about time the vicar had a dose of what it was like in the 'real' world.

As so often that splendid journal *The Tablet* came to my rescue. Talking about

higher education it likened what was happening there to many other areas of our national life. The universities and polytechnics had allowed themselves to become infected, said *The Tablet*, with 'the language of the grocer's shop'. As a result, higher education was in danger of losing its soul. These phrases struck me as describing with disturbing accuracy much of what I had experienced as a university counsellor.

For many academics and administrators there has been an almost total transformation in the ethos of academic life; they find themselves caught up in a competitive rat race, where not only can departments be swept into internecine strife, but individual worth is construed almost entirely in terms of research output or the ability to attract funds. Many staff who entered upon their careers with a genuine love of scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge find that there is no longer a place for them unless they are prepared to develop the skills and the mentality of the entrepreneur. Students for their part in such an environment can quickly cease to experience themselves as persons and become instead consumers of knowledge. And so it is that they come to the counsellor's office obsessed with the production of the perfect essay or paralysed with anxiety that they may not achieve the first-class degree which alone can bolster their dehumanised self-concept. The consumerist mentality and language of the grocer's shop has so infected the personality that the soul has fled and left only a barren identity preoccupied with achievement and the concomitant fear of failure.

Not infrequently now I find myself viewing counselling services in higher education as monasteries of a new dark age, for they keep alive the vision of a world where persons matter more than things and where mutuality and understanding are more important than achievement and competition. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that their subversive influence has been detected and that their reformation is already planned in high places.

The danger is that the therapists themselves will collude with the reformation by capitulating to the consumerist ideology and putting all their energy into ensuring that they are offering a good product, proving by their words and actions that they are intent on serving loyally in the brave new world of the managerial interest. Gradually and insidiously, perhaps without ever realising it, we too shall lose our own souls and become gloriously efficient at enabling our clients to function competently in a world devoid of meaning, where all that matters is what we do, how we perform and the impressive range of our material possessions. Hence my dilemma and my anxiety.

My latest contribution to the raising of standards was my Chairmanship of the BAC Working Group on the Recognition of Counselling Courses. In many ways this was a wonderful experience, as for three years I struggled away with a group of much loved and respected colleagues at establishing criteria and processes for the evaluation of courses. It was stimulating, enjoyable and what is more I felt proud of our results. But now I am aware of the agony and the heartache which have been caused to many trainers up and down the land, who for reasons some-

times beyond their control can never hope to have their courses recognised.

Similarly I see the frequent adverts in the national press where applicants are required to have BAC accreditation or to be eligible for it before their candidature can be considered. Where, I ask, is the soul in all this? Could it be that all the energy I have devoted over the years to schemes for accreditation and recognition, all the many hours spent in committee and in working parties, could it be that all this instead of improving the quality of therapy and enhancing the well-being of both therapists and clients has led instead to the creation of an exclusive professionalism, adding anxiety, competitiveness and the fear of judgement to the lives of those who were previously lovingly and conscientiously responding to the needs of their clients? Have I, in fact, played right into the hands of those who have neurotically created this death-dealing culture of accountability and appraisal where the basic assumption is that nobody is really trustworthy and where everyone has to be monitored and given incentives if they are to do a good job? I am genuinely bewildered by these questions and there are times when they threaten to tear me in two.

Sometimes I feel that my own therapeutic tradition makes things ten thousand times worse for me. I am committed to my client's path, which he or she alone is capable of discovering, given that I am equally committed to offering my unconditional acceptance, my empathy and my own transparent genuineness. As a therapist I am resolutely opposed to the imposition of external standards, to the passing of judgements, to the formulation of clever interpretations. By word and behaviour I attempt to convey my validation of the uniqueness of the individual and to counter the conditioning which for so many people has led to a sense of inferiority, inadequacy or even worthlessness. And yet in my professional arena my name has, with justification, become associated with accreditation, with the application of rigorous standards, with external judgements.

Some years ago in an essay entitled 'Beyond the Core Conditions', I described my work with a particular client called Sally for a book entitled *Key Cases in Psychotherapy*. The object of the book was to invite therapists of many different traditions to focus on therapeutic relationships which had proved maximally challenging and which had revolutionised their therapeutic practice. I was, I believe, particularly daring in that book, for I chose to describe a relationship with a woman who had come to see me because of grave sexual difficulties. Indeed, she herself collaborated with me in the writing of the chapter. This is not the occasion to talk about our experiences together in any detail but I should like to end this paper by quoting from the final section of the account where I am attempting to assess the significance of the relationship for my work as a therapist and for me as a person.

In some ways, I have come to think that it was with Sally that I had the courage for the first time to test out the person-centred approach to the furthest limits. For more than a decade I had attempted to be accepting, empathic and genuine with my clients. I had also tried to trust their innate wisdom and to have

faith in their capacity, given the right climate, to find their own way forward. Never before, however, had I found the courage and ability to experience and express those attitudes and beliefs so consistently over such a lengthy period of time.

With Sally I could not dodge the implications of believing that I am an eternal soul, that the source of all being is infinite love, that the body is the temple of the divine, that sexuality and spirituality are indivisible, that prayer is a route into the invisible world. To be genuine with Sally meant living out those beliefs in the moment-to-moment relationship with her. Talking about them was at times important and necessary, but far more fundamental was the way in which those beliefs coloured and permeated my acceptance, not only of her, but also of myself. I had to take my own soul and body seriously and to cherish them as much as I cherished hers. To be empathic also assumed new dimensions. Souls and bodies, I discovered, can receive and understand each other as well as minds. Touch, massage, holding, hugging, fighting became the channels for a form of empathy which was beyond words. In the sanctuary of silence our souls met and acknowledged their common inheritance. In case all this sounds unduly solemn, I should also add that there were times when we were both rendered helpless with laughter.

With Sally I dared to be whole because nothing less would do, and in the process I discovered levels of genuineness, acceptance and empathy which gave access to a transcendent world where healing occurs because the understanding is complete. In short, thanks to my work with Sally, I have come to acknowledge and to affirm that for me the practice of person-centred therapy cannot be divorced from my journey as an eternal soul. This does not mean that my therapeutic work has taken on an overtly religious aura. It does however, enable me to be fully present to my clients in a way which was not possible before, and to be in touch with a whole range of experience which was previously excluded from most of my therapeutic relationships.

I now believe that most existing theories of personality and personality development sell the human species short. With Sally, I came to recognise the essential mysteriousness of personality and found in this a refreshing change from theories which attempt to offer an almost complete understanding. Much the same can be said of my view of human relationships. With Sally I found myself responding to another individual in ways which were new and uncharted, and I have come to think that, as therapists, we do ourselves and our clients a great disservice if we remain fixed in certain modes of relating in the mistaken belief that these alone are 'therapeutic'.

In summary, my work with Sally convinces me that, if two people believe that love is the governing power in the universe, and that we have not yet penetrated more than a fraction of the mystery of human personality or human relating, then they may be prepared to accept and to share their weakness, vulnerability, embarrassment and ineptitude and find that it is in this apparent poverty that riches are concealed.

I have no doubt whatever that my work with this client was perhaps the

most taxing and the most rewarding I have ever undertaken. What is more I have never felt more responsible to someone nor more in touch with my own integrity. And yet I have a strange feeling that the courage which we both required had little to do with professional standards and responsibility as we usually understand them, very little to do with the letter of the ethical core and everything to do with its spirit. We were drawing pure water from the well of suffering which is also the well of life. Could it be that this is the very water we are in danger of poisoning in our zeal to become exemplary professionals with impeccable credentials and ever higher standards? The question does not go away.

Replacing Your Certificates

David Jones

From time to time *S&S* will publish material about organisations that control the training, accreditation and registration of therapists to check out how well they serve the interests of practitioners and clients.

The Problem

Practitioners seeking accreditation with AHPP for example, or who want to register as a counsellor with an agency (such as the employee support agencies) have to produce certificates as proof of their credentials. Some magazines and journals also ask for proof of credentials before accepting an advertisement from a therapist. What happens if you lose the certificates? Is it easy to get them replaced and what are the costs, and hassles?

What We Did

We found somebody who had lost their certificates and got them to write to the people who issued them asking for replacements. The following is a list of the organisations asked (in alphabetical order):

AHPP (Association for Humanistic Psychology Practitioners) for 'certificate of admission as a full member in the category of psychotherapist';

BPS (The British Psychological Society)