

So What's All This Therapy About?

Susan Jordan

In September 1992 I had been 'in therapy', off and on, for twenty years. Longer than that if you count time spent in a psychiatrist's waiting-room when I was seventeen, awaiting the ritual 'How are you?' and 'Keep taking the tablets'. If I look back over that period, virtually the whole of my adult life, I can see how much things have changed, and I sometimes wonder how much they would have changed had I simply gone on living and got older in the usual way without thinking so much about it. Supposing, that is, that I'd had the temperament to do so, which I doubt. On a row of houses in Oxford, where I began this particular journey, is the Greek quotation 'A life unexamined is a life un-lived', but I think I've tended to err on the side of too much examining and not enough living. Which perhaps is why I find myself now wondering just what all this therapy has been about, is about and should be about. I was going to say I can't speak for other people, but really there's nothing I like better than a few good generalisations about life, the universe and everything, gleaned from my vast experience of — well, mainly of not experiencing things.

Why I started it all in the first place — never dreaming that I'd still be at it twenty years and a hell of a lot of money

later — was that for some reason during my adolescence my thinking mind came apart from the rest of me and left a gaping hole where the person should have been. I still haven't fully fathomed how or why this happened, but apart from everything else it has left me with the sense that I've somehow been estranged from my own memories, feelings and experiences. Over the years the bits have been gradually coming back together, until I can almost feel that I belong to myself again; but the way has been a long, hard and tortuous one, fraught with confusions and misconceptions about what 'therapy' actually is. Perhaps the greatest and most crippling misconception has been of myself as a person with something seriously wrong with them, who needed drastic treatment to put this something right — rather than as someone who was just trying to carry on with life despite the limitations which no-one escapes.

From the psychiatrist who told me to keep taking the tablets and suggested I took up skating when I tried to tell him about my feeling of universal nothingness, I progressed briefly to a more human psychiatrist who actually talked to me like a person. Unfortunately she could only see me for a limited period and she passed me on to a psychoanalytical colleague of

Susan Jordan has been involved with therapy, meditation and writing for some time. She works with elderly people and has recently trained at the Karuna Institute.

hers. By this time it had begun to dawn on me that my depression, or whatever it was, was not simply an illness that could be got rid of by taking the aforesaid tablets. I have to say, though, that the tablets did help to lift me out of the worst troughs and were responsible for spectacular dreams that kept my analyst going for some time. I call him 'my analyst' as a kind of shorthand (privately I called him Annie List or, less benignly, The Rapist), but I never had a full analysis. Twice a week was all I wanted or could afford, and even that sometimes seemed a burden. At the end of every month I was given a hand-written bill with the fee in guineas, or when we went decimal, guinea equivalents. It felt like paying for a private dentist.

I spent many of my fifty-minute hours on the couch reading from notes I had prepared beforehand, like a good student at a tutorial. Eventually I started to write my 'thesis', an immensely long and detailed piece of self-analysis which I now find practically unreadable. To be fair to the analyst, he did try to encourage me to talk more from my own experience, but I think he was seduced by the things I said, away from the feelings that I couldn't quite express. And in all honesty, I think he was just as afraid of feeling as I was. There was always a box of tissues in the room beside the couch and an understanding these could be used if necessary; but it seemed to me there was also an unexpressed hope that it wouldn't be necessary. I'm not sure if I did ever cry in those sessions, though I certainly cried a good deal outside and around them, but as I remember it the emphasis remained pretty firmly on the exchange of ideas.

When I read all the many letters, journals, and 'essays' I wrote at the time, I'm amazed how clearly they state many of the central issues that I've been working on ever since. Looking back at it now, I can see that outlining them in this way may have been an important first step. But at the time it seemed that I was having to explain so much because the analyst didn't hear the things I couldn't say in words. So we would end up discussing, say, religion, or art, both of great interest to me, rather than getting down to what was really going on. From time to time he did make noises in the direction of transference — I remember him saying once how important it was for me to explore my feelings for him *and like him* — but I refused to cooperate, and I don't think he had the skill to work with my resistance.

As I worked with him over time, nearly four years altogether, I never quite got over my first impression that he was both self-satisfied and insecure. I remember him saying once 'But I can assure you I'm not self-satisfied, really I'm not'. I wasn't convinced by it. This was Oxford and the academic world loomed large. I came to see that my failure to realise my academic potential echoed his own wish that he could have done better and been more acceptable in academic circles. He was a clergyman, and before he became an analyst he had been a college chaplain. He was a great name-dropper and knower of famous people. I sometimes had the impression that much of his life was lived vicariously through them and clients such as myself with whom he could identify. When I wrote a novel some time ago I characterised him as the one person who

didn't know what was actually happening around him. Just before I finished my sessions with him I went through a crisis which I felt he misunderstood, partly at least because he knew the other person involved and had fixed ideas about her. I heard later that his wife had been having an affair with another man for nine years without him suspecting it.

Given that I had no great regard for his competence as a therapist and frequently felt I wanted to go deeper into myself — this was the time when I first got interested in meditation — why did I stay with him for so long? Four years of sessions, mostly twice a week, is a big investment (a word he often used) of time and money. There were a number of reasons. I had been told by a psychiatrist I liked and respected that this analyst was very experienced and 'knew his stuff'. I was repeatedly told by him himself that 'in this room' *something* would happen, and I suppose I thought that if I waited long enough then it might. And I didn't know about any other possibilities. At various times I thought of trying to find a Jungian analyst, which he in his Freudian orthodoxy naturally discouraged — as a Christian he was liberal, but he clung to Freud as dogma. But I didn't know of any Jungians and wouldn't have known how to find one. As I continued in my relationship with him, reading R D Laing and discovering the first glimpses of my own existential truth, I think I was secretly glad of the cosy intellectual chit-chat which stopped me confronting myself too violently. And although there is plenty I can criticise and have criticised, he was basically kind and well-intentioned and some of his insights have remained with me. A benevolent if

sometimes patronising father-figure — rather given to generalising about women as though he was some kind of expert on them — he did at least pinpoint the importance of my father, something that has only re-emerged recently.

At the end of my four-year stint I found myself in the worst mess of my life: broken relationships, an unsuitable job in a place I hated, a missed opportunity for a further degree, no money, and the possibility that someone I loved was fatally ill. During this time, when I was probably as near suicide as I have ever been, I read *The Primal Scream*. Probably no other book has moved me so powerfully or convinced me with such force that what it was saying must be right. Here I was, hopelessly doomed to a life of neurosis and unreality unless I could find the one and only cure, which would have involved going to California and spending all my savings plus a good deal more. When I read how the people at the Primal Institute were so open that they frequently cried when reading the story of someone's life, I was inspired to write with my own story, urgently asking whether they were going to set up a Primal Institute in England. To my surprise and disappointment the reply I received was a typewritten standard letter saying how much the treatment would cost, telling me I wouldn't be able to get a work permit, and making it clear there were no plans whatsoever for a move to England. I was left feeling even more hopeless than before. Not only was everything I thought and did useless, unreal and in need of destruction (or so I interpreted it), but there was now no possibility of being cured. At the time it hadn't occurred to me that everybody,

with the possible exception of a few enlightened beings, is neurotic in some way and to some extent. I thought I was one of the unlucky minority, and probably far worse than most people at that. I had to be, because I had already had all this treatment and was still not better. But then it also went without saying that the treatment I had had was useless.

What actually happened was that a friend gave me a brochure for a growth centre in London and I started going to weekend groups there. As it turned out, I was particularly drawn to a series with the title 'The Journey Within'. Despite Janov I couldn't relinquish the conviction that there was some kind of spiritual reality, and that meditation might be a way of finding it. In fact the groups where I ended up were a mixture of deep primal (as opposed to Primal) work and spirituality. From my comfortable couch-lying days, where fantasies of birth were treated purely as metaphor, I was plunged into deep regression, where people around me were experiencing conception, implantation and past lives with the same reality as incidents from their own childhood. It was then that I first became involved in the long process of exploring my own birth. That I could manage — the material started to jump out at me as soon as I lay down on the mattress — but I think I was really out of my depth with some of the rest, and very much frightened by it. However, I plugged on, desperate to learn to feel again and to recover the memories I thought I had lost. I became obsessed by the whole process, constantly trying to drag up feelings out of myself, 'primalling' myself during group breaktimes, and totally losing sight of the distinction

between what was then and what was now, often with damaging results for people I was close to. I still feel sad at the way I repeatedly flung my anger at my parents, thinking it would somehow do both them and me good.

Looking back on it now I can see how incredibly naïve I was. When people from the groups shouted and screamed at each other at mealtimes, I thought they were being free and expressive. Now I might find them unboundaried and self-absorbed. If I got negative feedback during groups, I would feel I had to accept it and make it part of myself, instead of trying to see, as I now would, that it might relate to the other people and not to me. If someone said they didn't like me for some reason or other, I would automatically assume that I was doing something to cause that dislike. My assumption was that everybody else, or nearly everybody else, knew more and could feel more than I could, and was therefore more 'real'. So when a man called me a 'fucking cow' because I didn't say hello to him at the bus stop (he didn't say hello to me either) I thought how brave and outspoken he must be, and that I had to take what he said without complaint as it was so 'real'. Because there was often unclarity as to what was 'you' and what was 'me'. and so much warmth and support of a slightly spurious kind, it was easy to get sucked into the group ethos and go on seeing myself as some kind of bad case who had a lot further to go than everybody else. In some ways that was true, but in other ways it was a denial of my own power and basic sanity. There was a part of me that was and continued to be relatively sensible and clear, but I don't think I or other people gave it

enough credence.

Eventually I reached a point where my life felt so bad that I knew I had to devote some time and energy to making it better. My husband had died, I was miserable in my job (a different one) and I was living unhappily with my parents. I was also discovering the value of hatha yoga and meditation as means of exploring myself. For a year or two I more or less gave up 'therapy' and tried to concentrate a bit more on living. This was fruitful and necessary, and by the end of that time my life was in a better state. I spent time on activities I enjoyed, like music and dancing, developed friendships and found a better job. But underneath all this was still the nagging feeling that I had never properly reconnected with the self I had lost. I still had the idea (again from *The Primal Scream*) that if only I could just have a few 'Primals' and get it all out, then I'd be all right. 'Getting the shit out' was a favourite phrase from those groups in the late seventies. At that stage I still believed that the most valid therapy was an all-or-nothing experience, a total conversion like St Paul's on the road to Damascus. Though of course in Janov's terms the light that St Paul saw would be regarded as a neurotic manifestation.

What took me back into therapy in the early eighties was the death of a much-loved woman friend with whom I had had a confusing and unsatisfactory relationship. Although my feelings for her were a mixture of reality and projection — as most feelings for most people are — I still believed that by digging deep enough I would discover that everything I felt for her was 'really' about my father or my mother. Anything that the relationship

itself contained would therefore vanish away into unreality, particularly as there were homosexual elements which by Janov's definition had to be unreal. It's hard to say how much my failure to achieve full heterosexuality contributed to my belief that I was more neurotic than other people, but it certainly played a part. I was surprised, then, when after a session spent grieving for my friend my therapist said, not 'So you see it's really all about your mother/grandmother/birth/father', all of which might have applied, but 'Yes, she was very important to you', giving my actual feelings a place which since reading Janov I had denied them.

Repeatedly in my sessions I would say something like 'This isn't Primal, it's just my feelings', imagining that a real 'Primal' would necessarily involve reliving a particular scene — which was of course the one thing I felt I could not do. Over time, and by dint of a lot of persuasion from my therapist, I gradually began to see that trying to have 'Primals' and make a lot of noise, which was what I had so studiously been doing, was less important than trying to stay with the feelings as they were. Judging them as primal or not was beside the point, as was feeling I'd failed if I hadn't 'got something out'. It also slowly dawned on me that wanting and trying and persuading myself to change and let go, and again feeling I'd failed if I couldn't or wouldn't, was not as effective as simply experiencing the stuckness (to use one of my un-favourite therapy words).

When I started going to groups again, after a couple of years or so of individual sessions, I expected them to be similar to the ones I'd known before. A friend and I

had always rebelled against the phoney-ness of certain aspects of group culture, particularly the slightly artificial warmth and people's tendency to use 'therapy language' to describe their feelings. It seemed to me, and still does, that if an experience is genuine then the person will find her/his own language for it. Sometimes of course using ready-made words and phrases can be a shorthand which other people in the group will understand, but sometimes it can also be a way of separating 'therapy' and 'real life' so that a person can learn to be good at the therapy game without making any real change in themselves. At first in primal integration groups I was disconcerted by the absence of group warmth, and my attempts to talk like a 'group person' got me nothing but flak, as did my voice, my accent and almost everything about me. This did little but confirm my feeling that there was something more wrong with me than other people, and that in the interest of being 'real' I would have to change the person I was.

It took me a long, long time to accept that — for instance — having been to Oxford, liking classical music and enjoying using my mind were aspects of me that did not *per se* have to be somehow got rid of, even if other people didn't think they were valid. I remember once in the old growth-centre days hearing someone say he didn't like Mozart any more, only rock and jazz, and thinking he must be much more real than me because he had abandoned his cultured tastes. At the same time a bit of me couldn't help thinking that by not liking Mozart he was actually missing out on something rock and jazz might not be able to give him. But the

conundrum or double-bind haunted me for many years: what I am is by definition not real, but if I try to be real as other people understand it, that is also by definition not real. Therefore I can't be anything or anyone. At the root of it has been a profound self-destructiveness and self-mistrust.

I spent a long time in primal integration groups lying on the floor with my head under a cushion, suffering. Partly I had no choice — that was how I felt — but partly I was still succumbing to the myth that only pain is real, and only by feeling pain can I hope for any change. Janov says somewhere that people don't need to spend time remembering and recovering joy — it's already there in the system — but from what I've seen of myself and other people, the joy sometimes needs much more work than the pain. Realising that I didn't have to suffer in order to grow was another milestone in allowing myself to be the person I am instead of the 'real' person I thought I ought to be. The freedom, creativity and sheer craziness of the primal integration groups helped me see that that is in fact what therapy is about: integration. Integration of all the many different parts, rational and irrational, likeable and unlikeable, similar to other people and uniquely my own.

It doesn't matter how much I work on my birth, say, if at the end of it I am no more accepting of myself and no more able to see beyond the conditioning I received then. If I still believe that I *have* to express my anger or my sexuality or any other facet of myself in order to be 'cured' (or whatever other term I may use) then I am not being wholly myself as I am. Even

if these parts of me do need expression, the real wholeness lies in acknowledging myself as I am, with them as they are: not an unchanging state which dooms me to neurotic unhappiness for the rest of my life, but simply the way of things at this particular moment.

So, returning to my original question, what has all this therapy been about? And could the acceptance that I'm now beginning to find have been found purely by living more and getting older? After all the mid-life crisis isn't the prerogative of those in therapy, nor is learning from experience. The second question isn't one that I can answer: my life has been as it has been and I've learnt from it what I can, both in therapy and in other ways. Buddhist teaching and the practice of meditation have probably been just as important, especially in recent years. At the age of forty-three I do find myself more accepting of myself, more open (I hope) to other people and more in tune with what I actually want from life, as opposed to what I

think I ought to want. There is still pain and suffering, but perhaps there is also a little more space around it.

And now I'm beginning to look at therapy from the other side: learning to work with other people as a chain of therapists have worked with me. Of course it's still working with myself too, finding out more of the difficult places and double-binds and areas of no confidence. I used to think that in order to be a therapist someone ought to have worked through all their stuff and ended up as little less than an enlightened being. The therapists I have had have all been disappointingly but reassuringly human, and I don't expect to be any different. But learning not to expect the perfect therapist has also meant learning not to expect perfection in myself, and therefore daring to be myself in all my imperfection.

And where am I now? To quote Churchill, more or less: 'This isn't the end. It isn't even the beginning of the end. But it may be the end of the beginning.'

