

Alvin Mahrer in London, 14th–15th June 1997

John Rowan

Alvin Mahrer is a great humanistic theorist and practitioner, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Ottawa, who came to London to do two workshops: the one on the Saturday was about working with dreams, and the one on the Sunday was about a new approach to supervision. The attendance was a little surprising: the supposedly popular workshop on dreams actually only drew fifteen people, while the supposedly narrow workshop on supervision drew twenty-two.

In the dream workshop Mahrer played a tape of a session with a woman who obviously got a lot out of it. As with his other work in psychotherapy, it was clear that he brought out a great deal of energy and deep feeling, and people were impressed by the force of the interaction. He insists on a dream which has two centres of feeling. He assumes that both of them are about the same thing. By checking one against the other, it is a lot clearer as to where the centre really lies. This is most similar, I think, to the work of James Hillman, in bringing out the heart of the dream from within the dream itself, rather than by an interpretation from outside. Mahrer then worked with a member of the audience, and again the energy elicited was quite remarkable. This was a good day, and people seemed to get a lot out of it.

In the day on supervision Mahrer explained his approach and gave many

many examples of how exactly it worked. He worked through a handout which gave in some detail the stages through which the procedure went. Instead of trying to correct the supervisee or help the supervisee the emphasis was on understanding the supervisee, and encouraging the supervisee to understand him- or herself. The procedure is all about enabling supervisees to get a fuller and clearer picture of their assumptive structure — what they think therapy is about. This is done by taking a short section of audio recording, selected by the supervisee, and asking questions about it, such as ‘What is it about this section that attracts or worries you?’ The questioning goes on until the supervisee becomes much more aware of the underlying structure of therapy which they are assuming. For example, one cognitive-behavioural therapist discovered that all his assumptions were Jungian. He had never read much Jung, and was pointed in the direction of finding out more about the method he had never been taught but was actually using in practice.

This is a radical approach, which would of course not be acceptable in agencies that look on supervision as a quality control or monitoring activity, but which is well suited to private practice and to those who want to go further and deeper than the constraints of their normal supervision would allow. Again the participants in the workshop were impressed by the energy

and humour of Mahrer himself, and one called him a 'Goon' — meaning that in some way his approach was quite anarchic. Mahrer was a bit puzzled, because for him a goon was a criminal who bumped people off. The participant said to me later

that he had discovered that Mahrer was a bit of a goon in this sense too, since he had in the past been a boxer!

This was a very enjoyable couple of days, enabling people to be in the presence of a master; a rare privilege and pleasure.

Honest Supervision

Personal impressions of Alvin Mahrer's 'Experiential Supervision' workshop

Tony Wilson

This workshop, organised by AHPP at Regents' College, seemed attractive because I was looking for something fresh in supervision, and as Mahrer was completely unknown to me, and it was sponsored by AHP, that was good enough. There were some 20-plus of us and John Rowan chaired in his taciturn and able way. As this seemed to be a shortened version of Al's usual two-day presentation, we sat and, mostly, listened, with some lively discussion from time to time.

I was gripped both by Al and by his subject for the entire day. Here was an approach to supervision and therapy that put openness and honesty uncompromisingly at the front of all agendas. Other ethical issues follow a long way behind honesty. Within his system there is room neither to hide nor for mediocrity. Once accepted as a person who can handle radical revision in the manner of Mahrer, and

given that you want to be a better therapist, then you will be a brilliant therapist, says Al. I tend to believe him. I struggled with it but believe it works in exactly the ways he says it works, because I probably often think in the 'crazy' way that he thinks, and have similar experience of supervisions. I also identified the simplicity and structure of his approach as being present in much of my therapeutic involvement.

One of the most powerful and sustaining influences in my life has been the co-counselling trainers' supervision group which I took part in for ten months of every year for fifteen years. From early in the day bells rang for me on the similarities between the approach of Mahrer and that of the trainers' group — simplicity, power, radical challenge, freedom to explore and reach my own conclusions, and lightness, warmth and caring attention.

Tony Wilson has an MSc in Training and Supervision and is a counsellor, supervisor and groupworker in Bristol.