

Are You Really the Therapist You Think You Are?

A report on Alvin Mahrer's Experiential Supervision Workshop

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My first impression of Alvin Mahrer was of a man with a real sense of fun. The word 'goon' popped into consciousness from somewhere and I shared this with him. He replied that where he comes from (Canada) a goon is someone rather tough, hired by the criminal fraternity to beat up someone else. Later he mentioned that at one time in his life he had been a professional boxer. In his own terms of deeper potentials perhaps I had intuited the courage and tough(minded)ness running through his approach.

He described how years ago he had found himself put in charge of psychotherapy training within a hospital without ever having given a session himself. He drew a blank on his requests to sit in on therapists' sessions and thus find out what psychotherapy was about. (A psychoanalyst interpreted his request as a desire to view the primal scene). This episode echoes Mahrer's refreshing quest to get back to the first principles, basic values and temperamental bias of each supervisee. Mentors he in due course found included Charles Kelly of Personal Construct Theory, Eugene Gendlin of Focusing and Carl Rogers, whose Person-Centred Philosophy clearly informs Mahrer's vision of therapy.

His method of supervision requires study of taped sessions and why a particular section of tape has been selected by the

supervisee. He asks why is that bit felt to be 'good, bad, exciting, bothersome, important, compelling?' Thus he homes in on each therapist's personally valued role, theory, principles, aims and objectives. Effective supervision in this mode means perforce asking a stream of figuring-out questions, with the naiveté of a child.

During the workshop he continually cited examples of how once a collective enquiry was underway (collective because he makes active use of supervisory responses from the group rather than just from him), therapists, both trainees and practitioners of many years standing, kept discovering that they had not been working as the therapist they really wanted to be. There was something subversive about his refusal of received wisdom and his emphasis on supporting his supervisees in finding out for themselves. I had the impression that I was in a minority who found him inspirational within the workshop group of twenty. It was as though Mahrer was positing a *false* therapeutic self into which the bulk of practitioners would tend to fall or stay stuck with, and a *true* therapeutic self for those practitioners prepared to undertake a kind of experiential research on themselves within the supervision setting; a cost of which might be the loss of preconceptions and a benefit of which might be the acquisition of a more

original and true-to-oneseif profession-ality.

For the psychotherapy training that conceives of its survival and furtherance in terms of capacity to take in, shape and put out, a corpus of trainees loyal to its modality, Mahrer's approach would be much too anarchic. Would that prospective trainees could enjoy a period in one of his supervision groups *before* assigning themselves to what, in his view (19 out of 20!), would almost certainly be a misfit in terms of their deeper potentials and authentic evolution. A way to bypass the false starts endemic when heavily marketed trainings compete for bums on seats?

This refusal to lay down the law on ethical matters perturbed those who had imbibed the new ethos of registered practice. Trusting his own gut response as to what was right or wrong, Mahrer placed an equivalent trust in his supervisees, in the right conditions, discovering appropriate and ethical behaviour. His stop-when-done approach to the timing of the end of a session and his one-session-at-a-time contracting (including a readiness to see clients for pretty much the rest of their lives but at perhaps six-monthly intervals) produced raised eyebrows. Given the invitation to work with him the potentially

abusive practitioner would slip away, the level of self-examination required would be too deep. His approach is very much a supervision of the therapist rather than the client and would go a long way to clear up counter-transferences deriving from unexamined first principles, incongruent values and unacknowledged sources of pleasure in practice. Mahrer described his personal refusal of an evaluatory role within the training context, quite clear that this would prejudice his supervisory capacity.

Like Dr Patch Adams, clown and healing visionary (who coincidentally I was also privileged to hear/speak/see/perform within the same week), a refreshing visitor from across the Atlantic. Comes or rather goes (because he's getting on in years and it may be a while before he's back) thoroughly recommended. One of those source figures whose approach if implemented can revive Humanistic Psychology. His book *The Complete Guide to Experiential Psychotherapy* (Wiley 1996) has been billed by one reviewer in aptly paradoxical terms as 'for the person who values basic growth as well as symptom reduction', including 'why and how effective or ineffective sessions are attributed to the therapist, not the client!'

