Co-counselling: The Early Days

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I first read about co-counselling in the programme of events for Kaleidoscope, the growth centre set up in 1971 by Bill Grossman at Swiss Cottage in London. I had just started training with a therapist who was interested in the different humanistic approaches coming across at that time from the USA, and he encouraged my initiative to try out some of these groups as an addendum to the group and individual work I was immersing myself in with him. My experience at that introductory weekend with John Heron (at around Eastertime of 1972 — 25 years ago as I write) tallied very nicely with all that my therapist was teaching me about primal release, gestalt dialogue and how to focus on feelings; but what was particularly nice about it, and differentiated it from every other workshop I went to, was the encouragement and opportunity it offered to take the techniques into your personal life by setting up a co-counselling partnership there and then with someone from the group.

I chose an attractive woman who was slightly older than me, more established in her professional identity than I was but on the other hand less adventurous in the group ambience. She turned out to be in analysis, which was something that I was curious about as a counterpoint to my eighteen months experience of humanistic therapy, so I looked forward to learning a lot from this new working relationship. She lived not far from me, so it was a convenient arrangement, and as I was living alone in my own home with only one shared wall with the next house and an easygoing neighbour, noise did not pose a problem when it came to raising one's

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voice. We co-counselled regularly for about three months and arranged to go to another workshop together in June, in Guildford this time, where John Heron was based at the university. Two or three weeks before we were due to go, however, she rang me up to cancel everything — our next session, all sessions, and her booking at the workshop. I sussed that this was a panic reaction to our last session, in which she had decided to work on her feelings about her analyst and I had offered to role-play him (standard co-counselling practice). I had not tried to say anything in this role, merely offered to represent him, but I had suggested she call his name. I can remember still, 25 years on, the anguish in her eyes as she stared at me, utterly taken aback by the strength of her reaction to this simple suggestion, the strength of her feeling about him. I encouraged her to keep trying, but she refused steadfastly, and I did not feel experienced enough to push her as persistently as I would have liked.

Non-professional structure

How businesslike I must have appeared to her, it seems to me now, how workmanlike in my handling of feelings, both my own and hers. I had thrown myself so wholeheartedly by then into the sharing ethos of the growth movement, with its presentation of intimate feelings and intimate personal relations as 'work', that I had begun to view all my feelings as work material, and all my relationships too. The co-counselling reinforced this attitude with its concept of the working relationship and its deliberately non-professional structure for use in any kind of setting. You could co-counsel anywhere, with anyone from any walk of life, just as you could relate anywhere with anyone. The exchange of roles that it insisted upon fostered the feeling of personal exchange, of shared problems and shared vulnerabilities. I had grown used by then to 'discharging' my feelings in therapy sessions and groups, and expected my co-counsellor to do the same. This relationship was to be my next step, the logical extension of the humanistic ethos into my social life, the first step in a transformation of my social relations that could lead me to become more expressive and open, more understanding of others and a stronger support to my whole circle, to society at large. It must have been a different story for her, though.

Transgression of boundaries

What I had no understanding of, at that time of idealistic expansion, was the concept of boundaries. If anybody had used the word (and nobody did, that I recall) I would have assumed it referred to confidentiality, and nothing more than that. So I had no idea of transgression when I urged my co-counsellor to speak to me as though I was her analyst, and I saw her refusal to call out his name as cowardice. This was judgemental of me, and of course I kept it to myself so as not to invalidate her integrity, but in my own mind I could find no answer to this judgement. The ethos of both co-counselling and humanistic groups in general in those days was that to reveal one's feelings was an act of courage, so to refuse just had to be the opposite, however much one respected people's right to go at their own pace.

At the second workshop I found myself a new co-counselling partner. Again I chose a woman slightly older than me whom I admired for both her intellectuality and her greater experience in life, and

this turned out to be the beginning of a partnership that was to last an extraordinary eight years, to be terminated eventually only because she was moving out of London altogether. In fact she was living in Cambridge at the time of the workshop but was due to move to London, and I remember driving out there later that summer for our first co-counselling session after the workshop, and meeting her husband and children. Even when they did move, it was to Lewisham, which entailed quite a long drive for my weekly visits through busy central London traffic, but I was very committed to the idea of finding the right partner and prepared to go quite a bit out of my way to ensure this. And it paid off. It was a wonderful relationship. I thought so then, and I still think so now. It became, in effect, an intensified friendship — intensified by the co-counselling — of exactly the rarefied kind I had been seeking, and I think the reason it worked so successfully where the first relationship had failed was because we shared an intellectual interest and an abiding personal commitment to the concept of spiritual growth. It was like a shared faith. In fact she was married to a vicar, whereas my own religious background was in agnostic Judaism, but this difference added to our interest in each other, rather than alienating us. Our lives were different in practically every other way, too, for she had four children, the youngest only a year old, so was a full-time housewife and mother, while I was very much the bachelor girl, independent, free-ranging, and free, too, to pursue my fascination with therapy and groups. The formality of the co-counselling set-up meant, however, that we saw more of each other than we ever would have done in a more conventional social setting, and gave us fascinating windows into each other's lives. The embargo on socialising was irrelevant to us — we had everything we wanted in the co-counselling itself. I went back to see her again, after a very long gap, during the writing of this memoir — we haven't actually co-counselled since she moved seventeen years ago and the old intimacy re-materialised instantly.

Falling out

It turned out that my training therapist had been introduced to co-counselling before I was, although he didn't tell me about this when I first expressed my interest, I suppose so as not to prejudice my impression. He had attended the big gathering of 1969 at the Inn on the Park, where Harvey Jackins and Alexander Lowen (among others) had first introduced their teachings to England, and soon after my own involvement began he decided to run some co-counselling workshops himself, using me as his assistant. They were well attended by a mix of people, both from his practice and outside. However halfway through the course he received a letter from Harvey Jackins, which he handed over to me to read for myself. In it Harvey said he no longer wanted therapists to teach Re-evaluation Counselling (RC), as his system was called, because their teaching would inevitably be contaminated by their professional techniques and theories; and would my therapist please stop teaching forthwith.

It was like a slap in the face: the unexpectedness, the sense it gave of personal objectionableness, the mean-spirited narrowing of the initial expansive vision of us all as ordinary men and women learning to counsel each other in a few short weeks,

accessing the hidden depths in each other without need of complicated theories or highly trained experts. The charge of contamination was particularly unpleasant, with positively fascist implications.

Dismayed and disappointed, my training therapist asked me to finish teaching the course he had started. For myself, I brushed off the initial impact of the letter with the thoughtlessness of youth and thanked my lucky stars for this opportunity to lead my first weekend workshop. After all, I was not yet a professional therapist, I was still an ordinary person. I finished the course, ran another whole one from my own home, and was invited to teach another outside London. It was valuable experience. I learned at first hand that although I believed in what I was teaching, I was not a good teacher and actually did not like doing it, even though the workshops themselves were very successful. But whenever I tried to express this, to my mind, quite realistic assessment of my teaching skills (for I was disappointed with my discovery) I was met with the fulsome validation that is the standard co-counselling response to what is seen as self-invalidation. It was this, rather than Harvey Jackins' unpleasant letter to my trainer, that prompted my first critical questioning of co-counselling theory.

The big conference

In the summer of 1973 Harvey Jackins came over for a big co-counselling conference at Arundel College, at which the foundations were to be laid for a Europe-wide co-counselling community, with John Heron formally deputed as area representative for Great Britain. My co-counsellor, who came to the conference with her husband and youngest child (for whom, as she has just reminded me, the crèche arrangements got cancelled at the last minute, so that she and her husband could only, crossly, attend by turns) offered herself as area representative for south-east London and environs, and the two of them went on from there to teach a whole series of courses from their own home. For most of the 100 or so participants it was our first sight of Harvey. People came from France and Germany too, and a friend of mine who happened to be a professional interpreter was deputed to translate all his speeches for them.

Harvey was impressive in a lovely, accessible way. He was plain-speaking and practical, yet at the same time idealistic and inspiring; a short, stocky man with an iron-grey crew cut and twinkling eyes. I remember being struck by the balance of his posture as he stood squarely before us, the way his feet were planted straight and parallel just as the bioenergetic leaders recommended. He also had a lovely sense of humour and was of course a very skilful counsellor, as he demonstrated over and over again in front of us all. He told the story of how co-counselling theory had developed from his experiences of trade unionism, communism and scientology, and outlined his vision for the future. Lots of time was provided for straight co-counselling in pairs and in small groups, and the amount of feeling expressed, *roared*, both indoors and out in the surrounding gardens made for a very warm and loving atmosphere, something I had never seen on such a scale before.

I was impressed with the way Harvey handled the critical questions from the professional therapists at the plenary meetings. Although his argument was no different from the letter my training thera-

pist had shown me, the undertone of brute rejection and exclusivity had gone. He welcomed them into the community of co-counsellors, he said, he just didn't want them to actually teach. And he thanked them for the service they had done him in being the first people to be interested in his teaching and to put the energy into running the first workshops in Europe. But he wanted it to be a grassroots movement, a form of self-empowerment for the people, and he retained his uncomfortable concept of contamination.

Therapists' discontent

I found his argument quite rational, and was honestly (and naïvely) surprised at the amount of discontent that went rumbling on among the therapists there, who actually felt like pulling out of the movement altogether if they weren't to be allowed to teach. I was still so completely identified with my student status and so cocooned in my private training arrangement with my therapist that it did not occur to me that most of these humanistic therapists had welcomed co-counselling as a solution to the problem of professional qualification. Most of them had none because humanistic psychotherapy was not yet recognised as a profession, so there were no training institutes and no recognised diplomas. Harvey's refusal to sanction their teaching on the grounds that they were professional therapists was an ironic and bitter repeat of their exclusion by the established professionals. It was a crazy situation.

Since I had reached my own stance by a separate route, I did not feel personally implicated in all this, but I retained a lively interest in the matter, as of course did my co-counsellor. I think it was about six months later that John Heron approached me and asked me if he could use my house to call a meeting of all the teachers of RC, I suppose because it was the most conveniently placed geographically. There were perhaps 15 or 20 of us, all sitting on the floor of my living room. He told us that he was unhappy about Harvey's highhanded treatment of the therapists and that he was unhappy too about his doctrinaire rigidity. There was more, but I cannot remember it any longer. All I remember was his announcement of his decision to form a breakaway movement, and the extraordinary exchange of letters that then flew between him and Harvey, copies of which got sent to all of us early teachers. It was like a soap opera, with histrionic reproaches and protestations of love and sorrow and high-minded principle. I kept the letters for many years and eventually threw them away. It was a distressing break between two much loved and admired leaders, and I was heartily glad not to have to choose between them, and to be able to go on happily co-counselling with my lovely partner. My training therapist, like several others in the humanistic field, took from the teaching what he found congenial (a substantial body of it), blended it with techniques from other humanistic sources, and taught it in his workshops under another name, which is exactly what Harvey had recommended to the therapists at Arundel. 'Take as much of it as you like,' he had said. 'Just call it by another name.' But that didn't wash away the therapists' bitter feeling that their goodwill had been abused.