

John Heron and the Paradigm Shift

Bernard Springer

Co-counselling came to Britain along with other branches of humanistic psychology in the early 1970s, and the second issue of *Self & Society*, April 1973, contained an article explaining Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) contributed by John Heron, who was in charge of the Human Potential Research Project at the Centre for Adult Education, University of Surrey. He had been appointed European Reference Person by Harvey Jackins, the founder and guru of RC. John Heron proceeded to teach and write about co-counselling, but by October 1973 had produced *Re-evaluation Counselling: A Theoretical Review*, in which he criticised some aspects of the basic theory. He did not invalidate the use of co-counselling, but argued that there were other ways of achieving the same results.

Harvey Jackins does not take kindly to revision of his theories, and in February 1974 John Heron resigned from the RC Community. In the May 1974 issue of *Self & Society* he wrote 'An Open Letter to Harvey Jackins' in which he said '(1) The client is in charge, but Harvey is in charge of all the clients, and (2) the client is liberating his occluded intelligence, but on all basic matters of theory and policy it is Harvey's

intelligence that counts.'

This led to a split between the two men which has not healed to this day. But there were others who had fallen out with Harvey Jackins, and in August 1974 *Self & Society* carried a draft proposal by John Heron for a Co-counselling International. Those involved were John Southgate of the North London Poly, Savitri Shinya, another to break with RC, Dency and Tom Sargent from the USA, the Dutch Co-counselling Community and Jean-Michel Fourcade.

Co-counselling International (or CCI as it is generally known) was launched as a loose federation of co-counselling communities. Although John Heron continued to teach and write, there was no community in London until Anne Dickson took the initiative. She ran two co-counselling evening groups in Kilburn and out of these, the London Community was born, with its own committee and newsletter. Soon Anne Dickson went off to concentrate on women's assertiveness training, but Peter Clark, who had been a member of her group, began teaching at a wide range of local authority evening classes. These were subsidised and cheap, so the London Community grew very rapidly. There

Bernard Springer is a retired chartered surveyor who has been in co-counselling since 1976. He was a founding member of the London Co-counselling Community and is a co-counselling teacher.

were, of course, developments in other parts of the country, but with its wide catchment area, London was by far the largest.

But with the Thatcher era, there came a change. Local authority budgets were cut, the Inner London Education Authority was abolished, and further education suffered accordingly. There were few local authority classes and those that there were became much more expensive. Most co-counselling teachers now had to run their classes privately and do their own administration and publicity. Consequently it became more expensive to become a co-counsellor and numbers dropped. However, the London Community survived the change remarkably well. It soon became clear that it was attracting two types of people. There were those who wanted a network of people with whom to work; but there were others who saw in co-counselling a chance to establish a sort of alternative lifestyle. So workshops, ordinary weekends, national weekends, European weeks, USA weeks and even New Zealand weeks were set up, in addition to the more humble peer groups.

The most used text book was and is *How to Change Yourself and Your World* by Rose Evison and Richard Horobin and when Windy Dryden and John Rowan wrote *Innovative Therapies in Britain* it was to these authors that they turned for the chapter on co-counselling. Not many of the new co-counsellors therefore knew of John Heron. To those who did, he was a highly respected although somewhat remote and withdrawn figure. When the European week was arranged at Coleg Harlech in Wales in July 1995, a group of teachers arranged for a teachers' workshop to be held the preceding week and announced that John Heron had accepted

an invitation to address it. His address was trailed as a major policy statement and a 'paradigm shift'. The statement was duly made and is now available on the Internet. For anyone who wants a copy the address is <http://home.stlnet.com/~ccounsel/> and it is only fair to John Heron to read it in full, if possible.

Heron starts with a summary of the basic theory of RC and appears to repeat his 1973 criticism that rational thought alone, without feeling, is not a proper guide to action. But Jackins has made it clear that he thinks humans, free of their hang-ups, are loving, kind and co-operative, and that these qualities will surely influence their activities. Heron goes on to say that 'Marx's ideas about class structure, and his vision for the working class, are no longer relevant in the modern world'. This is a popular view at the moment, but irrelevant to a CCI audience, which has never been Marxist, although there is a general leftist slant to its thinking. However, to suggest that there is no class structure in this country is obviously absurd. Heron continues: 'The whole theory [of co-counselling] is a form of humanism'. This should surely commend it to practitioners of humanistic psychology.

He then comes to what he calls the 'paradigm shift'. He states that the original theory holds that there are three root causes of human distress: ignorance, natural disaster, and social oppression. Strangely, he did not mention these in his previous summary of the original theory where he gave 'the primary source of human pain' as 'parents oppressing and hurting children'. Indeed, this whole idea must have been news to those present, because it has never been part of CCI theory and most co-counsellors don't know that it is part of RC's.

Heron does not dismiss the whole of the theory, but plumps for ignorance as the prime cause. Natural disaster is given a lesser place. But his main target is social oppression, where he has some strange things to say. He admits that 'discharge and re-evaluation may well heal the hurt caused by social oppression and also the underlying hurt caused by ignorance,' but claims that for oppressed groups, 'first and foremost this is about coping with the physical world, the dynamics of the surrounding culture and each other, not about coping with their distress feelings. That comes in a further and later stage of development.' So no co-counselling or therapy for them. Is this a call to political action? It seems not. 'If we put all our energy into opposing the rigidity and oppression of the old society, our radical identity becomes parasitic on what it opposes; we are defined by the evil we condemn.' So what are these oppressed groups to do? 'We need to teach the value of drawing energy from a positive future, bringing a new society, a self-generating culture into being.' How this is to be done without struggling against the old is not clear. And why should the oppressed not seek to 'heal the hurt caused by social oppression'? Fortunately it is unlikely that any of those concerned will take any notice.

Getting to what Heron calls the core of the paradigm shift, he goes on: 'Who I really am is a divine being with a limitless capacity for expanded awareness and charismatic abundance. Somewhere in my being I know this and somehow in my being I have become nescient, not knowing it, or, which is more to the point, somehow I have forgotten it.' The absurdity of some-

one proclaiming simultaneously that they are a divine being and that they have forgotten the fact is obvious, although the concept of a race of gods with bad memories is an amusing one.

In other words, Heron sees co-counselling as not just about growth and ridding oneself of maladaptive practices. It is about becoming divine. His statement introduces a vague religious element which seeks to bring co-counselling more into line with New Age thinking than with humanistic psychology. Since co-counselling contains people of all religious beliefs and of none, the paradigm shift has not been to everyone's liking. The national CCI journal *One to One* printed several critical articles, as did *The Hug*, the London Community newsletter. To date John Heron has not replied.

People come into co-counselling because they have problems of one sort or another or because they feel that they are not achieving their potential. If they feel that they have received some benefit, they stay in. They are accustomed to the use of ritual, symbolism and myth in the workshops that they attend, but most regard these as an aid to their psychological development rather than as a mystical experience. It is over two years now since John Heron announced the paradigm shift. There is no sign that it has taken place. It seems that a decent man has struggled with the problems of existence which have baffled the minds of the world's greatest thinkers. He has come up with an answer which most co-counsellors have not accepted. The announcement of the Paradigm Shift can now be seen as a False Move.