Divine Madness

Guy Dargert

'I've always been crazy, but it's kept me from going insane.'
Waylon Jennings

What is wisdom? What has wisdom to do with the practice of psychotherapy? Is wisdom maybe something to do with maturity, experience, age, learning, or knowledge? In trying to picture it, might we think of Freud or Jung at the end of their lives? Is wisdom something to do with old men wearing spectacles and surrounded by books? If we were pressed for a definition maybe we would agree with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines wisdom as the 'possession of experience and knowledge together with the power to apply them critically or practically'.

This is not a universally agreed definition, however. Buddhist teachings, for example, take a different view. When they speak of an enlightened person they say such a one can be easily recognised because they will appear to be a cross between a child, a mad person and a ghost! None of these figures sound particularly 'practical' or 'critical'. Instead we find value placed on innocence, spontaneity, playfulness, irrationality and the unearthly. The Buddhist view does not equate wisdom and enlightenment with detached reflection and considered response to life's experience. It focuses on the capacity to participate immediately in the irrational flow of life's events. In our own tradition it is the innocent child who notices that the emperor is wearing no clothes, or the Shakespearean fool who come nearest to modelling for us this more direct and involved way of knowing.

Robert Ornstein and others have demonstrated how the left and right hemispheres of the brain govern different mental functions. It is known that the left lobe of the brain predominantly controls the right side of the body, carrying out the functions of 'analytic, logical thinking, especially in verbal and mathematical functioning'. The right lobe (which controls the left side of the body) specialises in 'holistic mentation' and is responsible for 'orientation in space and artistic endeavour'. We could use Ornstein's model of the brain as a metaphor to compare the *OED* and the Buddhist understandings of wisdom. We might then be tempted to say that the Oxford definition is a Western, left-brain, rational understanding. The Buddhist view could be described as an Eastern, intuitive, non-rational understanding. If wisdom has anything to do with being a whole and actualised person it has to include a large element of the non-rational, which the Oxford definition lacks.

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How reasonable is reason?

'I treated thoughts as if I generated them myself, but in his view thoughts were like animals in the forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air . . . '

C.G. Jung on Philemon, his spirit guide

The traditional Western scientific worldview is narrowly rationalistic and dualistic. It diminishes the value of the subjective. The philosophical stance of rationalism holds that knowledge of reality can be obtained by reason alone without recourse to subjective experience. It is a remarkable paradox therefore that its founder, René Descartes, put a high value on his dream life. Descartes attributed the inspiration for his theory of dualism to a dream figure. Another dream figure encouraged him to pursue a career as a mathematician. The very foundations of Western science owe a debt to the non-rational and subjective dream world.

It is impossible for us to step outside ourselves and look at our nature in a thoroughly objective way. We can agree wholeheartedly with Stan Grof when he says, 'It is important to remind ourselves that science never "proves" anything; it only "disproves" and "improves" existing theories. The history of science itself teaches us that no single theory explains all aspects of any phenomenon, and there is always more than a single theory that claims to account for the observable facts.'

Our sciences, theories and beliefs are no more than agreed staging posts. However widely accepted and effective our beliefs may be, there can be no ultimate proof. If there is rationality in the universe, then rationality itself is an irrational given. No one invented it. It was discovered. It was the gift of a dream.

The Hungarian dolphin

There can of course be problems when we think that we have arrived at one of the staging posts of our shared assumptions, only to find that no one else is there. I once talked with a man who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic. He told me about a great book he was going to write. He was certain it would make him world famous. First, however, he needed a title that would be worthy of so great a work. To my ears the conversation was becoming increasingly strange. He told me that he felt like a 'Hungarian dolphin'. 'What is that like?' I asked. 'It's like I'm being ridden round and round in circles.' I held on tight. 'Who is riding you?' I inquired. 'It's my father. He's a Prussian army officer, you know.' I didn't know. I lost my grip and the dolphin swam free.

Was this man completely mad? Was I mad for being unable to understand what possibly made perfect sense to him? Was there sense in what he said and were we simply not sharing the same metaphors and assumptions? Did he feel himself to be mad? If he did feel himself to be mad and I had understood him would he still have felt himself to be mad? If I had understood him would we have been sharing a mutual madness, or would we both be sane?

The discussion left me bewildered and intrigued. Some time later it began to make sense when I learned that the dolphin has a symbolic connection with the womb. (The Greek root 'delphis' means 'womb'.) The dolphin swims in water and somewhat resembles a human foetus in shape. In this case the man was maybe saying something like this to me. He felt vulnerable

(like a baby) and needy (translate 'hungry' for 'Hungarian'). Perhaps the great book suggested his need for recognition as a unique and special individual. His surname did not sound particularly Germanic, so I imagine his father was probably not a Prussian army officer. More likely he was telling me that he experienced his father as a cold, relentless and strict disciplinarian who was forever 'on his back'. Maybe he was also beginning to find my questions oppressive. He not only succeeded in getting me off his back but he also told me exactly how he felt in a vivid and primitive language. If he was mad there seemed at least to be a method in his madness.

If the dolphin man were to accept my translation of his words into predominantly left-brain 'therapy' language, would this make him any saner? Surely his own right-brain metaphorical language is truer to his experience than any interpretation? Our communication broke down. Was it madder of him to be unable to talk my reasonable language than it was for me to be unable to see his metaphors? If one goal of psychotherapy is to move toward wholeness, then surely both sides of the brain need to have an equal status?

Flying with chains

'Then I didn't fly, Don Juan, I flew in my imagination, in my mind alone . . . If I had tied myself to a rock with a heavy chain, I would have flown just the same, because my body had nothing to do with my flying.' Don Juan looked at me incredulously. 'If you tie yourself to a rock,' he said, 'I'm afraid you will have to fly holding the rock with its heavy chain.'

Carlos Casteneda

Carlos is a shaman's apprentice. He is trying to understand an experience he had while in an altered state of consciousness. He can't figure out whether he really flew or 'just' imagined that he flew. He is insisting that he understands his experience in a way that accords with our Western, scientific rationalistic cultural norm. This is what 'real' seems to mean to him. In terms of our discussion we might say that Carlos's dilemma is that he is trying to use the left brain to grasp an experience that can only be known holistically with the full participation of the whole of his being. His experience simply cannot be contained within a rational framework. His teacher, Don Juan, gives him no room to escape the discomfort of being with his experience in an immediate way.

In Casteneda's early books we find him diligently recording his experiences on a notepad. He regards himself as a scientific inquirer engaged in anthropological research. No matter how bizarre his experience, the notepad acts as a kind of lifeline that keeps him connected with Western consensus reality. In this way he seems to attempt to keep himself safe from the rawness and fullness of his experience.

What Carlos attempts to do for himself is perhaps rather like what many psychotherapists attempt to do for their clients. Both therapist and client feel a sense of achievement when a connection is successfully established between personal experience and consensus reality. Depending on the school, this may be brought about by skilful and timely analytical interpretation, or by client-led reframing.

Gains in rational understanding undoubtedly calm anxiety for both client and therapist. At the same time they may decrease tolerance of the non-rational and

the potential for full self-realisation. Reality cannot be contained within any rational framework. As I said earlier, Buddhist teaching recognises three components of enlightened being, the child, the mad person and the ghost. Of these three, the child is usually invited and welcomed in psychotherapy. Some schools are more sympathetic to the mad person than others. If there seems little hope of helping people to connect their madness to consensus reality, they may simply be referred for psychiatric medication. Ghosts are even less popular. Little recognition is given to the parts of our nature which lie beyond the personal unconscious, or to the nature of our surroundings that are not quite in or of the world as we know it. Like the wind, there are aspects of the world that are unseen and invisible and yet produce tangible effects with which we must deal. What purposes are being fulfilled through us that may be beyond the ken of either therapist or client? Do we simply ignore and deny what cannot be seen or known?

The Greek root of the word 'psychotherapy' literally means 'to give attention to the soul'. If we are committed to helping people to 'heal' or, literally, to become whole, to which components of the soul do we actually attend? If we offer a critical and practical psychotherapy that limits its interest solely to rational understanding and to connecting personal experience with consensus reality, are we really doing justice to the soul? Are we dealing with reality at all? Are we dealing only with those portions of reality with which we are comfortable and familiar? Perhaps we are simply reinforcing our Western left-brain-dominated world view. This is a view which is itself in desperate need of healing.

Further reading

Carlos Casteneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge*, University of California Press, 1968

Stanislav Grof, *The Holotropic Mind*, Harper Collins, 1991

Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Routledge, 1963

Robert Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness*, Pelican, 1978