

Practising What We Preach

The development of the AHPP Working Party on Core Beliefs and Working Humanistically

Eric Whitton

Having been for seventeen years a tutor on counselling courses based on a humanistic approach, I had spent many long hours debating with students and colleagues the meaning of 'humanistic'. So when I joined the Board of AHPP I was glad to have the opportunity to continue this exploration. In 1994 I joined the Ethics Committee, in order to become involved in a process which might show me how the principles I had espoused for so long were applicable in a very stressful activity. One particular complaint left most of us feeling that we were being asked to administer a procedure which, while fair in principle, in practice caused us a lot of discomfort. At a meeting soon after my May 1995 election as Ethics Officer we raised a lot of searching questions about how we could operate a complaints system humanistically. We asked ourselves what were the beliefs which should guide us in the way we carried out our task. The theoretical base was so wide that there was little that we could refer to. So we thought it was time to take up the challenge and look at our practice in the light of some common ideas which could be the basis of our actions. Ethics I believe is what we do, not what we should do.

Subsequently we agreed that Christopher Coulson draft some proposals for the

next AGM to establish our core beliefs and to examine our practice across the range of AHPP activities: complaints, accreditation, the way we carried out our business and generally the way we dealt with one another. Four proposals were drafted by Christopher and seconded by myself to set up working parties to examine our philosophy and behaviour across the whole range of our work.

About that time there was a flow of correspondence critical of the way the Board was conducting its AHPP business and questioning our relationship with UKCP. As a result motions were presented to the AGM that a referendum be carried out to determine its policy on statutory registration.

Looking back it was unfortunate that these two independent concerns clashed. Personally I regretted that those who wanted AHPP to review its policy were so narrowly focused on UKCP, whereas the other process was concerned with looking more widely at the foundations of AHPP. It is also interesting to see that statutory registration, while an intent of UKCP, seems to have become a dead duck! What may still be in question is the degree to which AHPP, acting on its humanistic values, can go along with a body which may act contrary to what we value.

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What then seemed to ensue on the Board was a personality clash, and the two 'camps' polarised. It struck me at the time that there was a lot of unnecessary antagonism. There was also a belief that the motions from the Board were deliberately set up to head off the other motions against statutory registration. This was not true. As I have indicated above, the motions from the Board originated with the Ethics Committee. It was also noticeable that two of the Board's critics, having gotten themselves voted on to it, resigned after less than four months. Having lost their case, they did not choose to find an active way to support the AHPP, nor to be involved in the Working Party where they could have had an influence. Instead they continued to conduct an aggressive verbal assault on Board members. Some of this was personal, some impersonal through the columns of *Self & Society*. Though I agreed with much that was intended, I found the manner quite offensive and not in accord with what I regarded as humanistic. In spite of the negative feelings that these people stirred up, the Working Party gave serious thought to the points they had made.

All this may seem to be a digression from tracing the process of the concerns of the AHPP in establishing a humanistic code of belief and practice, but it is a demonstration of two different approaches to change. I imagine most of our members don't mind enough to make their voices heard in this debate. Perhaps it seems remote from their day-to-day concerns with their clients. But I consider that what we are about in this movement is vital to the way we view ourselves as humanistic practitioners. A major reason for belonging is that we care about how we do what we do. However the AGM

did result in a working party being set up in November 1995 to deal with the two resolutions that were passed: firstly, to try and come up with a set of organisational core beliefs that would be used to guide development and monitor our actions; and secondly, to explore humanistic ways of resolving accreditation, complaints and ethical issues.

A general invitation was made to the whole membership to contribute. A written response came from about twenty members. The first stage was convened by Christopher Coulson, who was responsible for collating the papers, and this culminated in a meeting I chaired in September 1996, called to consider the issues raised by the papers submitted and to decide on a plan of action. It was agreed that there is such an overlap between beliefs and practice that they should not be separated, and so only one working party was seen as necessary to continue the work.

The next stage was taken up by Tony Morris, who has since acted as co-ordinator for the Working Party. Together with Christopher Coulson, Cabby Laffy and Tricia Scott a *Statement of Core Beliefs* was produced, as printed above. The second part of the task — how to work humanistically as an organisation — was seen to be ongoing, and the following issues in particular need more consideration:

- Can we establish criteria for an organisation to be humanistic?
- How to maintain close relationships between the Board and the membership?
- What are the merits of a questionnaire or referendum on key issues?
- In what ways are being humanistic 'alternative' or 'democratic'?

- Is there a humanistic view of registration?
- What is a humanistic process of accreditation?
- What is a humanistic practitioner?
- Categories of accreditation?
- What is a humanistic complaints procedure?
- What are the issues for training?

In the past two years the Board and its committees have been more aware of the need to be guided by some essentially humanistic principles and have tried to apply them, in a limited fashion: for example at every Board meeting we share our concerns, both personal and professional, before moving on to business. We are also planning to have a process observer at each meeting and to take time out to look at our process. Last November we held a symposium in which four people presented keynote speeches on the application of humanistic principles in practice. Out of this came a groundswell of enthusiasm which has resulted in the forthcoming 'alternative conference'. The Ethics Committee has been looking at alternatives to expulsion, and giving greater emphasis to informal resolution of complaints through mediation. The Members Committee has introduced a fairly thorough interviewing process as part of the application for membership; we have also been concerned to offer support to Associate Members in their professional development, which we hope will take a positive step forward with the Associates Day on 16 May 1998. Although I recognise that this is only a beginning, it is now a major part of our development as an association.

I hope that the present direction of AHPP is leading to our being guided by first principles in the way we operate, while at the same time allowing for a divergence of opinion about the way we function. Willingness to look at our activities takes courage. Ideally we would like to involve the majority of members in deciding what is good practice, but the truth is that only a minority put in the energy to affect policies which may affect their association.

Being humanistic derives a certain set of life experiences, mediated by a person's development as practitioner. More generally, it is a collection of theories, methods and approaches which grew up under the umbrella of the human potential movement. In my view there is no such thing as humanistic therapy or counselling, only humanistic practice, by those who aspire to work with human nature rather than against it. At a previous workshop on accreditation the key words that summed up for most members present what they thought they were about as practitioners were 'freedom', 'love' and 'respect'.

These truths cannot be contained within a code of ethics or rules of practice. Being humanistic cannot be legislated for. It is a basic attitude to people than can still be expressed despite differences of expression. For me being humanistic is trusting the process, not a formula. I don't agree with a lot of what my colleagues say, but I go along with a lot more than half and I will put my shirt on that! And though we are dealing with serious matters, and sometimes people get hurt, I can't help laughing at times at our attempts to get it right. Billy Connolly would have a field day.