Responsibility — Part II

Andrew Samuels

Social responsibility

For many years, everybody has known that psychotherapy is potentially more than a means of easing personal distress. Freud and Jung knew, the founders of humanistic psychology such as Maslow, Perls and Rogers knew, that psychotherapy has inherent in it a critique of society and a set of values and ideas about, for want of a better word, 'improving' society. It is therefore nonsense to talk about ideas of bringing psychotherapy to bear on social issues as if they were new. They are as old as the project itself. I am fond of saying 'We've had a hundred years of psychotherapy trying to make the world better, but the world has stayed pretty much the same' (to play with the title of Hillman's book We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World Is Getting Worse).

Psychotherapy has always wanted to do what the radical fringe still wants it to do. But the record of psychotherapy in the social responsibility area is actually very bad. There has been a lot of collusion with oppressive regimes, whether in Nazi Germany, or 1970s Argentina. There's homophobia. There's the mindless joining in with right-wing attacks on lone parents and their families, as if it was absolutely essential for good mental health to have two parents, and if you don't have two parents of the opposite sex present all the time you will be fucked up. How collusive with the majority prejudice — when every therapist in the world knows that half the clients they see have had two parents of the opposite sex from one another, and that they are alive today, and the client is still miserable.

If you want to be a socially responsible therapist, you have to actually make your case to people (not therapists at all) who are already in the social responsibility area. They look at what we do, and they look at what we say, and they say, 'Well, we don't want this. You may want the world in treatment, but the world is not coming to its sessions.' That is what the world tends to say. And the world is right to avoid therapy, I think. For the way ahead in the social responsibility area is in a multidisciplinary and collaborative context, if we can find it. That means, instead of aiming for a particular committee of psychotherapists to address some social issue or other, let us try to get a psychotherapist on to every relevant committee. See the difference? A committee, or a commission, or a workshop, or a task force (as the government tends to call these things) needs a

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statistician. So they have one. They may not like him or her very much, but it is useful. Psychotherapists may be useful in a way that actually sits at the other end of a spectrum of utility, but I am sure the general point is clear.

Another way of looking at the social responsibility issue is to start to think in terms of addressing citizens as potential therapists. Here, we are talking about the citizen's use of her or his self. Now, the Diana phenomenon has illustrated that on the mass level the issue of people taking political and social action, or communicating a political and social point of view on the basis of distilled emotion, already exists. I think it is very very important for psychotherapists to say to their fellow citizens that they too can be therapists of the world in which they live. It is not just the official therapists who can be therapists of the world. Potentially, anybody can be a therapist of the world. This is a very big change from the theorisation you find, especially in psychoanalysis, which tends to see the citizen as a kind of baby in relation to the world or the society, which is a kind of mother or father. The citizen is always the baby (or the patient, because the patient is always a patient), and the world is the mother or father. I would like us to think about playing with the reversal of those terms.

None of these ideas could even remotely be relevant were it not for the fact that the nature of politics is changing. Feminism put it on the table that the personal is political, and we have moved on from that starting point. Politics is more and more about matters of personal transformation than it used to be. That is why so many people now understand what they do, in the environmental area, in gender politics, in ethno-politics, working with poverty, even working as a counsellor or psychotherapist, as being profoundly political. I have even seen a book called The Politics of Hang-gliding, which may be taking it a bit too far! Nevertheless, this expansion in the notion of politics is something that psychotherapists can make use of, and indeed have contributed to.

So it is not, I think, pious over-idealistic dreaming — although there's some of that in it too — to consider having a psychotherapist on every relevant committee, or to talk about citizens as therapists. There is a new transformative politics in the making, and I think we should be part of it. It is hard work, though. Every year, with colleagues, I take a fringe meeting to the Labour party conference. In 1996, which was the last conference before the election, we submitted the title 'Preparing for Failure'. What we had in mind, you see, was that things were not going to work out as well as everyone hoped, things are not going to be only exciting and wonderful — in that sense Labour is bound to fail. (Look what has happened.) The party organisers heard our title as 'Preparing for Losing the Election', so we had to change it to 'Preparing for Disappointment', which was approved. (In 1997 we talked about the psychological aspects of the Welfare-to-Work policy, under the title 'Putting Emotions to Work'.)

Spiritual responsibility

Again, what I want to do here is to write about bringing in the spiritual dimension as a regular thing in therapy, done by all of us at some time, and not something only by those people who have led the way,

such as Maura Sills and the Karuna people, and other psycho-spiritual therapists. They would probably say, 'Well, Andrew, we've been doing this for years.' And I would say, 'Well, how many of you are there?' What I want is for us all to think and debate about working with the spiritual dimension in a way that does not actually worry us any more, just as I wanted people to work with political, social and cultural material in a way that is no longer worrying.

What do I mean by spirituality here? To begin with, there's a democratic aspect to spirituality which sits well with the psychotherapeutic project. Spiritually we are all equal. Spirituality is not something you can measure. Inherent in the very notion is the perception that wealth, education, attainment, intelligence, attractiveness, membership of this or that psychotherapy society don't matter a bundle of beans when it comes to the spirituality of a person. Hence, if we do want to work in a way that minimises the power shadow of therapy, that deals with the whole problem of professional hierarchy and inequality within our world, a spiritual perspective there is very very useful, if nothing else, because spirituality and equality go together.

There is another aspect of spirituality which I do not think is spoken about enough, and that is the social one. It is not a question of spiritual beings meeting to do good things in the world. Rather, if you meet with others to do good things in the world you become a spiritual being. This may be a somewhat Jewish way of looking at it. What I am saying is one does not have to be spiritual first to get to do spiritual things. One can be a secular, materialistic, consumeristic person, but, if one gets together with other people to do good — and I am speaking obviously in deliberately simple terms to make the point — then something spiritual happens to you and the other people you are meeting to do things with.

Another aspect of spirituality that gets overlooked is that it is in fact artificial. Spirituality is made, it is a craft thing. Doing my work well, as a therapist or anything else, brings a certain kind of spiritual aspect into my work. Holiness is manufactured, as well as found. Now this is a very difficult kind of academic, sort of post-modern point to make. But I really do want to stress that spirituality is not like an orange. Spirituality is more like a car, or a chair, or a temple. You make it. You are responsible for it, just as eventually it is somehow responsible for you.

Then there is profane spirituality to consider; this is something therapists need to stay close to, summarised as sex, drugs, and rock and roll. These surface aspects of contemporary culture carry their own profound spiritual charge, even if they lack the conventional decorousness of what we usually associate with as spirituality, whether as part of mainstream religion or not.

I think psychotherapy today, viewed as a spiritual movement, presents certain interesting historical parallels to monasticism in the Dark Ages. First, I think we are keeping certain values alive in the face of a lot of opposition to those values, which I think the monks and nuns were also doing, and knew they were doing. There is also a much more profound parallel. Monks, nuns, hermits, religious people believe — perhaps arrogantly, that's the shadow, but

they do believe it — that what they are doing benefits people who are not doing it. Now, this is a potentially crazy thing I am inviting you to think responsibly about here. I am talking about the influence of psychotherapy beyond what goes on in consulting rooms, and beyond what goes on even in the Labour party! I am talking about our belief that what we do matters to such an extent that even people who are not touched in any tangible or measurable way by it are affected for the better.

Responsible leadership

I want to give an indication of my idea of the good-enough leader. Good-enoughness is a very interesting topic. According to Winnicott, good-enoughness means that you stop either idealising or denigrating yourself as a parent, and you create a climate between you and your child in which they do not have to live at either of the two ends of that spectrum, idealisation or denigration. They become tolerant of your inevitable failings as a parent. You're not a fantastic perfect parent, and you're not a witch, or a demon, or the devil, or something like that. You're somewhere in the middle. A parent achieves good-enough status in that she or he lets the child down in a certain kind of way. It is graduated, moderated, contained, it has got humour in it, it proceeds by trial and error. But what the parent really has to do to become a good-enough parent is to fail. When the parent fails, and the failure is managed well enough, then the parent becomes good enough. So somewhere at the heart of this ideogram 'good-enough', which every therapist in every country holds dear, lies failure.

Now, forget mother, father, parent. Just think of good-enoughness. Good-enoughness is about negotiating the extremes of idealisation and denigration, managing failure in an acceptable way. Let's apply this to the question of leadership. I am not saying good-enough leaders are good-enough mothers. I am not saying leaders are mothers or fathers at all, actually. What I am saying is that we can learn from the study of good-enoughness something that we might be able to apply in, hopefully, a multidisciplinary way, to the phenomenon and problem of leadership.

Leadership is then always already about failure. And I think there are three important aspects to this. And all of these, in my view, are going to be crucial for the UKCP in particular, and the psychotherapy world in general, as we enter what I predict will be the most stormy, painful, disgusting period of the history of psychotherapy in this country.

Firstly, there are actual failed leaders. In real politics one might think of someone like John Major. I am not going to talk in the psychotherapy context about specific individuals. But there are failed leaders, leaders who made a mess of it. Either they were too rigid, and the opposition swept them away, or they were too plastic, unable to draw boundaries and push anything through to a conclusion. But, secondly, the very idea of leadership, in its heroic masculine cast, has failed, not only for the psychotherapy profession, but in the political world as well. We have trouble with heroic leaders, and we are right to have trouble. We need other myths, other styles in which to do leadership than that of the hypermasculine hero. Now this may be hard for me personally, because I am unconsciously identified with the

hypermasculine hero, and I only know how to lead in that way (and I am not the only one).

In a sense, I have to admit that for people like me the recognition, intellectually, or deeper than that, that the heroic idea of leadership has failed is proving very hard to cope with indeed. Nevertheless, in the confessional spirit that was a part of the UKCP conference, I think we have to think about leadership as the art of failure. Remember what I said: that this is something UKCP is going to have to think about in particular. Ulrich Beck, the German sociologist, says we live in a 'risk society', which means we cannot predict what is going to go wrong next. BSE is a good example of that, as are train crashes and the like. Governments cannot do anything about such risks. Understanding leadership as the art of failure takes this idea of risks and says: 'Let us accept we cannot control things, that we won't succeed in doing what we wanted to do, that nothing works out as planned.' Psychotherapists already have in their collective experience something else that involves the art of failure, and that is that we cannot control the unconscious of therapist or client, we cannot control the drives, desire, imagination, internal imagery, interpersonal relations. We live with the failure of our therapeutic projects all the time. So actually we are quite suitable as a constituency for these ideas about leadership: that it is about failure, that the art of failure and the art of leadership are the same thing.

I would like to end with a poem that I discovered while lying on a beach in Portugal this summer. It is the frontispiece poem from Ann Karpf's book *The War After*, which is a second-generation holocaust survivor's memoir, and incidentally a book about a successful psychotherapy, although the reviews of the book did not bring that out. The poem is untitled, written in Polish by Jerzy Ficowsky and translated by Keith Bosley.

I did not manage to save
a single life
I did not know how to stop
a single bullet
And I wander round cemeteries
which are not there
I look for words
which are not there
I run
to help where no one called
to rescue after the event
I want to be on time
Even if I am too late