

Witness as Beacon: The anatomy of a projection

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Attending the AHPP 'Open Space' Conference in Oxford at the beginning of May, whose broadest brush-stroke 'title' to the weekend was 'To Be or Not to Be Humanistic', I found myself being asked in the first plenary to say a little more about the word I'd thrown out into this initial arena. The word was 'witness'.

For a mixture of reasons I will come on to I chose to bat off this invitation with rather bad grace, saying that I sensed in the person who had asked me a potential intellectualisation of something which, though I did not say this, seemed self-explanatory. I personalised my reply further by suggesting that if I was to go deeper, at this early stage, into what I meant by bringing the word 'witness' to the weekend, I and the questioner might well find ourselves in conflict, as when it had been his turn to say a few words to the newly gathered group I had found what he had to say rather academic in tone.

'So what?' one might ask, and with reason. 'What's so terrible about conflict?'

Over the following night, which I spent in my camper-van down by the barges on the river, I mulled over my defensive outburst and quickly understood that I had launched a massive projection on to this stranger who, I realised as soon as I had thought it, had received it kindly and with

great generosity.

While I had been defending an unattacked position — that of not wishing to expound on 'witness' — I had dragged in the irrelevant fact that I had a brother, a father and a business partner who were and are, each and every one, 'intellectualisers' and that I spent my life trying to get away from them. So I was saying: 'In short, mister, back off!'

Another reason, I believe, for my truculent response to my fellow participant at this conference was that he, I, one of the conference organisers and, lastly, a representative in some official capacity of the AHPP were the only four men there. I didn't realise it at the time of course but I believe at this early stage of the proceedings I perceived a definite staking out of territory going on and that I felt a certain panic that I would be trampled underfoot and go unnoticed by all the women and the other men in the company. I believe it was important for me that I was valued, from the outset, and not overshadowed by any of the other three men. Thus when one of them invited me to perform, as I saw it, 'intellectually', the opportunity to rebuff him, however gently, was a convenient way for me to stake out a bit of territory.

Finally and in the mildest way in mitigation for the projection, I believe on some

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level I had sensed a certain voyeuristic stance from this particular participant, as he had told the assembly he hadn't appreciated that this was as much of a membership gathering as it was, not being himself an AHPP member, and that he had come principally for the opportunity the weekend offered of meeting people who were working as humanistic therapists in the Oxford area.

This sense of the voyeuristic was confirmed for me after he left mid-way through the next day, having made a serious and extremely helpful bunch of contributions to the whole weekend. In later correspondence he reminded me that one of the four defining principles of an 'Open Space' conference — the rather crudely expressed 'Law of Two Feet' — was, as he understood it, that you should be where you need to be, doing what you need to be doing as you yourself assess it at each moment; holding no-one else responsible for your being where you are or for keeping you from where you ought to be. This was a learning curve for me and not easy to take at the time, and thus I found the old defensive truculence resurfacing within me (because of my disappointment that he was going) and I said to myself: 'Oh, seen enough, have we!'

Actually Hugh, for that is his name, gave me what I came to the conference for — a signpost and a stepping-stone to exploring more deeply my Buddhist leanings, both as a therapist and as a person.

The 'witness' in me that I brought to the conference has wished to give voice to one particular psychological incident — that of my projection on to Hugh at that first plenary meeting. To share the unfolding and working through of this projection is

too precious not to dare to do, although I admit it is not the easiest thing to own. It demands a level of what I call 'inner honesty' — a state of accepting one's inner warts and all, not just one's outer appearance, be they physical, emotional or intellectual. If we could all relate more at this level of inner honesty the world would be a more accepting one, and the individuals within it the more centred for it.

When one can accept one's inner warts and all one has less need of defensive strategies. The Buddhist approach is so full of examples of this that it is difficult to choose just one, but the phrase 'bare attention' seems appropriate to the world of the therapist. If we can give this bare attention to our clients, to ourselves and to the dynamic between ourselves and our clients we are more likely to be able to serve them honestly and with genuine humility, a quality so beautifully present in the Buddhist tradition but so lacking in much of Western spirituality.

When we seek this bare attention the crux of the matter appears to be to actively, consciously welcome our inner honesty. And to welcome our inner honesty we need the aid of the Witness. Not only the inner witness but the outer witness also. This way we can view not only our selves but the effect our inner and outer selves might have upon others and how that, the effect we have on others, in turn affects our inner world.

Witness, for me, has a glorious luxuriant quality steeped in privilege. It is that part of us that does not have to find answers for how we are, it merely has to see how we are, but with an honesty that is unassailable. Thus 'witness', the very word, has such a sense of balance within it,

can hold its head high in response to that memorable statement made by Wilfred Owen (in the preface to a book of poems he was planning, but never saw published, from the trenches of the First World War): 'True Poets must be truthful'.

It occurs sometimes that people use truth as a defence against over-zealous enquiry of their inner beings. The kind of people who will put you back on your heels by saying something so blunt and to the point that they know it'll take a while for their, as they see it, assailant to pick themselves up and come at them again. I believe my first contribution to the 'Open Space' conference had this element. I wanted it known that, despite 'appearances' (whatever my fantasy was of how others saw me!), I had something 'serious' to contribute. What a load of poppy-cock ! Certainly I

had something to contribute and hope I did so, but so did everyone else, and only they know whether or not they did so to the high standard of Wilfred Owen's brave criterion.



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