

# politics, psychotherapy and the soul

Erik Erikson, in a remarkable 1977 collection of lectures, 'Toys and Reasons,' mostly given in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, looks at how play, in infancy, and later in adult life, in the safe setting of a 'shared vision,' provides 'a private space-time orientation in interplay with a world-view which gives structure and meaning to the (bewildering) multiplicity of experience.' The infant learns about power, vision and powerlessness. Later adults do the same on the political stage. Our language bears this out: *theatres of war, media circus, the Clinton soap opera*. Increasingly TV is used to put on the show, but it may be offering 'fake reality' which, Erikson says never tells the truth, unlike 'true make-believe,' which plays with facts but cannot lie: drama, film, fiction, art. What then is reality? And what are the 'shared visions' and aspirations of our world - and the world of those who work as psychotherapists?

Last November I ran a workshop for counsellors and psychotherapists entitled 'Politics, Psychotherapy and the Soul.' Its aim was to explore how far psychotherapy might find itself becoming a bridge between spiritual values and practical action in the world. It consisted of a simulation exercise

(structured psychodrama), and took place in a small theatre which offered many spaces to accommodate different groups of people. We were playing at local politics, but the issues were global. It concerned a small community threatened with extinction. Who would care for its soul - locate it or even recognise it?

This imaginary rural parish, 'Hazelbury,' a one-time village, was on the outskirts of a city which is swallowing it up, forcing its small shops out of business, corrupting its unemployed youth. But it is being offered regeneration if it allows a large tract of land, which belongs to a woman of the local aristocracy, to be sold to a pesticides producer for a factory and research centre. He promises jobs, an influx of moneyed middle-class workers, and other benefits. His champion on the spot is an old buddy, the local estate agent. I can't list here all the numerous people and issues involved; I'll select what became especially noteworthy.

Once organised, and roles allotted, the simulation ran freely for two hours, then concluded with a one-hour public meeting at which a decision had to be made about the sale. After this there was an hour-and-a-half out of role for feedback and discussion. I've run

many simulations over the years. This was the first time I ventured to include the soul - not knowing what that might turn out to be. They are remarkable learning experiences, and devising them is tricky: it depends on available time, numbers and topicality. I had to rule out some areas of concern (e.g. overt racism) and some age- groups. In the event, both in the Hazelbury community, and the project itself, there was a sense more of failure than success. Subsequently I myself emerged feeling that my idea had been over-ambitious and a failure, though obviously it had led to powerful learning for many people. We were undoubtedly affected at that time by national, global and seasonal dejection: there were feelings of disempowerment and lethargy. Defences against this pre-Christmas climate came into play. Sorrow was muted or denied; the fear of death which must put us in touch with soul was paralysed or expressed as nervous anxiety. Anger there was, but its effectiveness was dissipated.

Since the essence of a simulation is that it has time-boundaries and an end-purpose, the tension, between containing structure and freedom of expression, is marked. It became acute when the anarchic elements in Hazelbury produced a backlash in the shape of a domineering and oppressive policeman, while other agencies were trying to mediate sensitively and avoid extremism. The initial energy with which people had adopted their roles began to fade after an hour: inertia took over, with the power lodged, seemingly immovable, in the landowner, the manufacturer, and the purveyors of stagnant moralities or religions, or drugs and lies. Participants reported later that they felt trapped: hopelessly stuck in

their roles, pushed into them and fixed there by those around them.

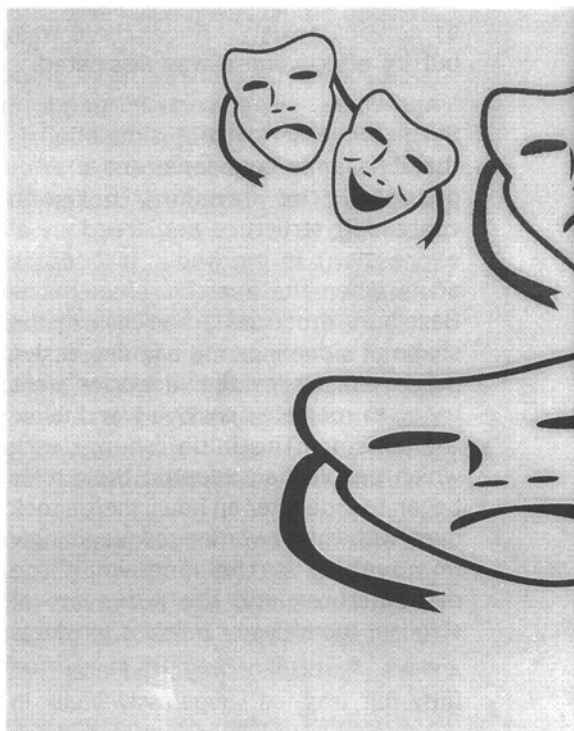
And I too had become oppressive authority: the person who devised the exercise, 'setting people up,' typecasting them maybe to meet her own needs, her own psychodrama. There had been projection and envious non-co-operation all along, from the time I proposed the workshop three months before. In my controlling role was I being seen as a prime minister? A dictator of therapist rules? A self-important priest or God? Clearly there was disillusion with the creator of the workshop, as there was with the creator of New Labour, or the Creator of the Soul; protest was assumed to be useless.

In an insightful account, written later, of the day's experience, the policeman observed that in deciding to play the sort of authority he has been battling against in his working life he discovered how he - and others - 'resorted to expecting stereotypical and unhelpful responses from people in authority.' The man who played the unpopular manufacturer expressed despair later with the way he'd become unapproachable and 'soul-less,' deducing that 'the most negative aspect of politics is the way it plays on the neurotic functions of power in individuals and discourages any serious inclusion of self-doubt...'. Similarly Erikson, looking at how the democratic 'American Dream' had become a nightmare, observed 'Masses of individuals, having learned to "make like" free men... were instead confirmed in stereotyped roles within the politics of narrow and confining conditions.'

The British, I think, deal with the nightmare with resigned denial, passive cynicism and stiff-upper-lip doggedness. Hazelbury, though shamefully neglected and robbed of its livelihood, was barely able to express its sense of loss. Had the young woman with terminal cancer wailed loud 'I don't want to die!' I think the depth of their grief would have been reached and they would all have been in tears, realising the shattering of their illusions of human power. Confining authority structures have to disintegrate; if there is any hope, it surely lies in the soul's ability to re-invigorate human vitality and sense of meaning. What then did 'soul' - transcendence - mean?

What happened, in a completely unexpected way, was that the structures of the exercise itself underwent disintegration. A degree of negativity I'd not foreseen was injected into the simulation, its boundaries were violated, and my 'best-laid plans' for redemptive learning were largely negated - indeed, my illusions were shattered. The first person to 'be' the soul quickly gave it up. The elderly poet-seer refused to write anything. The one potentially loving sexual relationship between two lively artistic young people was turned into a situation of breakdown and disease. Sex was manifested through prostitution, and those representing the media felt themselves pushed into the gutter, repeatedly offering snippets of 'sleaze', as if not expected to report intelligently. The complementary medic, an adherent to Buddhism, was largely mistrusted. But most striking was that no-one wanted to take on the designated roles of humanistic counsellor and analytical therapist in the Hazelbury Health Centre, nor risk

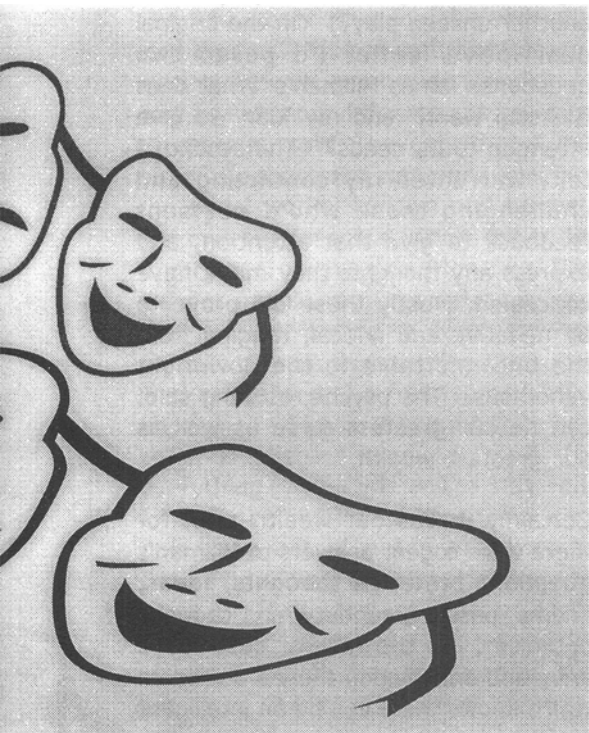
acting their disinclination into the role. I was powerless to insist that the roles be filled - because the numbers attending weren't as planned. Of the 35 enrolled paid-up participants, 7 didn't appear, and only one let us know in advance, which scuppered my casting plans. Then when feedback questionnaires, with s.a.e.s, were sent out immediately, to forestall the pre-Christmas rush, less than half were returned by New Year. Are therapists, I wondered irritably, as depressingly incapable of commitment, trust and valid communication, as the wider public? Indeed, is our psychodynamic group culture hopelessly idealistic, promoting belief in a 'democratic' community in which power is shared, based on mutual respect and self-regulation, where the energy of facilitating leaders inspires and is inspired by 'the people'?



Of course, as was pointed out in the very full and illuminating comments of those who did respond, insufficient preparation had been given, and the time was far too short. Such an exercise does need a whole weekend at least. But nowadays there's little hope of filling a two-day workshop: the stresses and financial demands are too great; that's our socio-economic context. Indeed, being effective with limited resources is the name of the game. As it was for Hazelbury. And in the event their strength as a community began to come to the fore, where people in this emergency had to look, albeit awkwardly, at issues, and tensions, and muted affectionate relationships, that had been hidden for years. This gave a quality of feeling to the public meeting which, in spite of inept bureaucracy, the absence of psychologists' facilitating observations, the maddening loud-voiced prowling of

the policeman, and the disruptive chanting of the eco-protesters, came to a resolution. The community was able to turn down the would-be purchaser's bullying, while moving towards reconciling the alienated landowner with her long-estranged neighbours, encouraging her to invest in Hazelbury's future, rather than the Third World charities she'd aimed to benefit from the lucrative sale.

In the background, the emotional gender struggles were all too familiar. Much distress centred on the poor relation between men: fathers, sons, peers, while the women tried to assert feminine values alongside or against men's egos, with varied success. But it was a deeper level that the collective psyche was working, for the woman landowner's relationship to the land, earth, soil, was not that of the men, such as her cousin Lord Hazell, who'd inherited vast stretches of the countryside. A significant piece of local history had achieved the status of myth: a convent and its nuns - many from the Hazell family - had been mysteriously destroyed by fire centuries before... was it suicide? The remains were buried deep under the disputed piece of land, and this seemed to haunt Hazelbury, now threatened similarly with dissolution. It was at this level of women's mysteries, memory and death, that soul became active. Though denied by many, and unable to find its form through dialogue, dream or art, soul - symbolised by a lighted candle in a lantern - was soon taken hold of firmly and carried by a disreputable half-crazy bag-lady (a role which many people had wanted to take). She challenged everyone's equanimity and refinement with her outrageous 'dirty' behaviour and sly



wisdom: this was soul liberated - not trapped in a role, in a fixed system, personality or language, but faithful to its own wild truth. But, as she later wrote in a poem, soul 'soon fell silent/ Depressed by the weight of authority's non-entity.' The symbol of the candle silently burning endured, and by the end of the day it was faithfully alight, in the centre of the now weary group circle.

The bag-lady was in her fifties. The visionary poet, who also opted for silence, in her seventies. A younger woman, approaching thirty, had devised her own role, that of a young heroin addict who'd resorted to thieving and prostitution, who wanted only money, drugs and sex from her Hazelbury elders. No-one could get through her entrenched tight-lipped defiance; she stole valuable possessions, propositioned indiscriminately, and dozed and yawned her way through the public meeting. She was of course a young version of the bag-lady: in 25 years' time she would be a derelict - ugly, destitute, having acquired whose wisdom, which becomes the crone's wisdom - the crazy truth which is in the soul's darkness and the shadow of the masculine self-deceiving world.

Then I saw from her poem that the bag-lady had called herself Lil... and I was reminded that where boundaries are transgressed the archetype appears. Here was Lilith - my old 'familiar' whom I'd invoked by trying to give soul an identity, a physical body, in a confining structure. Of course I'd myself created the roles of bag-lady or tramp and poet, and had encouraged the invention of the young addict. Once invited, Lilith took me over too: angered by the way my months of hard work and careful plans had been frustrated and undermined, I hit out later at someone

in the group, momentarily blind to their vulnerability. I felt very bad about that inexcusable action. In the long run it did work out, painfully, with warm mutual understanding. Lilith's can be a healing poison. But her nose for corruption and her defiant and treacherous sexuality lead to her scapegoating by the collective which disowns those features in itself, as Hazelbury did. Unconsciously they invite her in to upset the system. Princess Diana and Monica Lewinsky are recent examples: both had a seductive sexuality and an angle on the world of money and politics. Diana rocked the institution of royalty and Monica that of presidency.

As for Lilith's rocking the institution of the workshop, the boundary transgressions soon laid bare the hidden agendas and secrets of the context and the co-sponsoring organisations. (Were we a play within another unseen play?) On the original descriptive leaflet I'd posed two questions: James Hillman's 'What does the soul want?' and my 'Can we give attention to its needs?' The second, I felt, warranted my contacting and challenging those who'd not sent feedback to give that attention, and express any thoughts they might have concealed. Mostly these did prove to be negative and critical, ranging from the uncomfortable to the downright venomous. The psyche, as Jung said, can be our greatest curse as well as our greatest wealth.

Certainly it was our wealth also, for there were cogent answers to Hillman's question: tentative thoughts, ideas, poems, passion, subtlety, and cautious optimism. In the face of destructive envy and annihilation there's a wisdom which knows there can be an intelligent

cultivation of love. In the Kabbalist tradition Lilith has her benign counterpart in the peaceful, erotic Shekhinah - divine immanence - through whom transcendence can be imagined.

This illustrates it well: one woman who'd not found time to send her feedback finally took the time to do so. She had taken the role of a middle-aged social worker, daughter of atheist-communist holocaust survivors. She tried hard to help the most desperate, needy, near-suicidal woman in Hazelbury, but came up against her hysterical intransigence, and her insuperable socio-economic problems. The bag-lady's badgering irritated the social worker: she sought a meeting with the young woman deacon at the church, who'd recently spent five years in South Africa. She described it as 'a significant and deeply spiritual moment, a "still point" of real connection between the two, who were both vulnerable and open to the other.' For her part, the deacon, who wrote with great understanding of how complex our defences can be when threatened, said 'The only time I got out of the constraint was when enabling the social worker to own and be with her own helplessness, which felt to be a very real exchange. However, this did not enable me (in role) to realise that I was defending so deeply against my own.' From this meeting the social worker realised she had learned 'that impotence was something that one had to live with... One couldn't fix everything. The trick was to stay with impotence while performing the balancing act of not giving way to despair, holding on to optimism and hope.' This kind of potential or provisional faith was expressed by others also. It brought to mind the words of the poet Wallace Stevens:

'After the final no there comes a yes/  
And on that yes the future of the world  
depends.'

In the many months since that day we've watched the destructive No at work in the Balkans and elsewhere, where the inhumanity of male warring, the ravaging of what we value, continues. There is the Yes, as the wounded doubtless pick themselves up yet again, weary and despairing. It seems the soul wants us to learn to ask the right questions about the reasons for our failures and suffering.

I think we learned a good deal in that workshop about what might be the 'right questions.' One thing in particular was that it wasn't the presence of psychotherapists within the simulation that would answer our questions, but the process of psychodrama itself, a creative form of psychotherapy, the vital activity of play which is always available to us, as Erikson stressed, when the world seems unmanageable. It relies on our imagination - which has long been regarded as the soul within us. I use my imagination in writing this account of what happened, so continuing the soul's work. And much of my inspiration has come from that master of the English imagination, Shakespeare, and his political drama - especially *Hamlet*, which is so concerned with the role of the play, madness, and the impotence of men and women.

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