

# Thoughts on retirement

Brenda Rogers

Some years ago a fellow counsellor said to me that one of the things that had attracted her to counselling was that you don't need to retire. She knew therapists in their late seventies who were now better than ever before: calmer, more objective, having a lifetime's experience.

I hadn't considered that at the time, but it did appeal. I couldn't imagine a time when I wouldn't want to do this wonderful, intimate, interesting, warm, rewarding and constantly changing work. My own main reasons for coming into counselling were as mixed as those of other therapists: a need to feel valued, interest, learning about other people, learning not to be afraid of other people, and the sheer intellectual excitement of discovering the huge variety of ways of doing and thinking about therapy. Another less worthy but very real reason was that I'd become tired of failing as an artist (not surprising when my aim was Tate Gallery or nothing, so the considerable local success I was having didn't count). I made a totally head directed decision to paint less and counsel more in the hope that this would be more satisfying and more 'worthwhile'. I also loved, yes really, really loved, Gestalt therapy. My very quirky training had put me in touch with an elegant way of working that connected very closely with my artistic creative side.

So here I am at age 68, fit and in full possession of my faculties - well, as much as I ever was - and I have almost completed the process of retiring. I haven't gone off counselling or lost any of my enthusiasm for it, I'm not disillusioned or tired of it, so why? Colleagues have gone out of their way to express that I'm not past it or out of touch or too old or whatever.

It has been a very gradual process. Ten years ago I was having the kind of life many counsellors have: teaching, facilitating groups, private practice, working for an agency. I drove all over the south-east and worked more hours than I financially needed, enjoying being asked to do such a variety of things and each new one such a challenge that I couldn't bear to turn it down. It was an exciting time, and because of the constantly expanding field of personal awareness work I could develop something new and pass it on to someone else as soon as something fresh turned up. So I taught assertiveness, group dynamics, interpersonal skills, problem solving, creativity, art and some very basic counselling skills and theory. I took a diploma in education and taught courses on the education of adults. And I kept my counselling practice going. I don't think I was the world's best counsellor, but I hoped that I was at least 'good enough'; I did my best and was aware that I couldn't solve anyone else's problems but I could value who they were, and that seemed, on the

whole, to be helpful, though not always. It's hard to remember all the people who felt that the counselling was useful for them, but I have no trouble at all remembering the people who didn't find me or my way of working acceptable, and the few where I made real mistakes (most were beyond my competence) stand out clear and strong in my memory. Not all the mistakes came out badly: one person wrote to me months later to tell me that my ham-fistedness had caused her to re-examine her life without the benefit of therapy and decide to make a success of it in spite of me. It would be wonderful but very Panglossian to imagine that the same happened for all the other people I failed.

I think I probably did better as a supervisor. I took the Metanoia supervision course because I felt I was getting stale and couldn't find a refresher or advanced training anywhere else. The training was great and I learned what I wished I had been able to learn years before: to stand back from my own work and get some objectivity. After I started to supervise counsellors and other therapists my work load started to increase so I cut down the teaching and discovered that the performance element of teaching, which I had at first enjoyed, was a source of stress for me. I had enjoyed being centre of attention in this very safe milieu. (Who can criticise the teacher when she's going to mark your essay?) But once I stopped teaching, which I did some four years ago, I didn't miss it at all. And the quietness of not being the important person in the room, as counsellor and as supervisor, put me back in touch with my rather more reserved and centred self.

I have enjoyed supervising greatly. I love making connections between

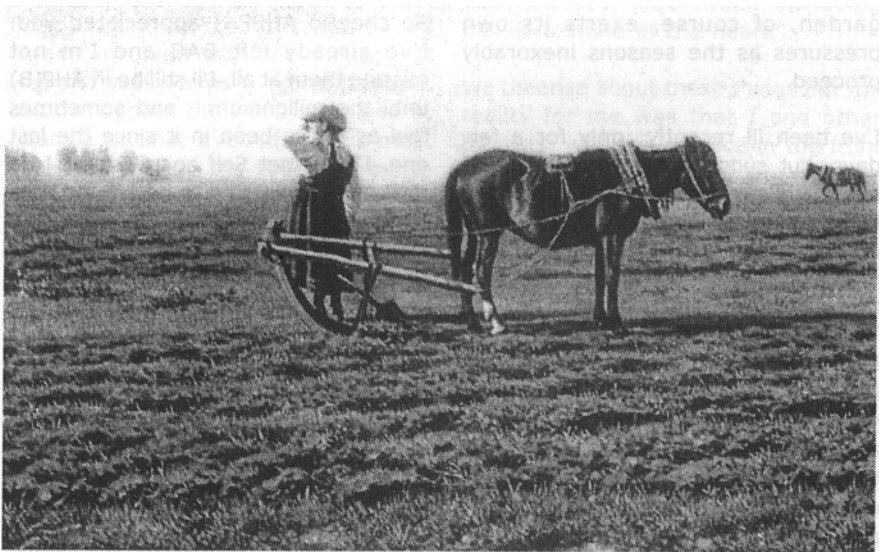
theory and practice, between counsellor's feelings and client's feelings, between then and now, between me and you. I have always enjoyed using networking and one of my greatest pleasures in life has been in putting people in touch with other people or situations. It was always a temptation to match-make with my counselling clients 'You're lonely and want a friend who likes classical music and in my head so why don't you meet my client x who would suit you down to the ground?' No, I never did it for clients, but I could do it with enthusiasm for supervisees and colleagues. So many things I 'shouldn't' do as a counsellor I could do beneficially with supervisees: have insights myself (what a relief to admit them), make connections and short cuts, experiment with differing ways to work, play with ideas in paint and clay - well, I did that with clients as well, but only the client used the materials, I didn't join in.

I look back on counselling as being FAR too full of 'don'ts'. Don't be anecdotal (is a story an anecdote?) Don't give advice - I admit it, I did sometimes, sometimes very loud and clear: 'No, don't kill yourself, we'll work this out together somehow'. 'No, I don't think it helps your agoraphobia to keep the curtains closed all day'. Don't be judgmental - I was and often needed to be. I tried hard with the 'I judge the behaviour not the person' but not being perfect I couldn't always separate the two, and I know from supervising so many people that with the best will in the world (and many of my supervisees had just that) it's damn near impossible to have warm positive regard for a person who is being cruel and knows it. I wrote a long piece for myself once on all the nonsensical things counsellors are supposed to

screw their own thinking up with, and maybe one of things I'm most enjoying about not doing this work any longer is that I can take some of these complicated constructs out of my head and think what I think and feel what I feel without the necessity of putting myself into the counsellor frame. I've counselled and supervised very many counsellors in training and it has been sad to watch them struggling with the mind control aspects of the training.

'What', you say, 'are you suggesting that therapists are brain washed as part

of their training?' Yes, of course they are, we are. It's very obvious now but wasn't then, that Carl Rogers' conditions for counselling are the result of research to find out what works best. The message is that it tends to work better if they're present, not that it won't work at all if they're not. But the way it's taught on counselling courses is that the counsellor must supply their end of it and have warmth and positive regard and empathy, regardless of whether they really like and care about and understand this person. And they're supposed to have inner



congruence and genuineness at the same time!

So here I am, my counselling practice already closed, and with only a few more supervisees to say goodbye to. I'm already well into my new / old lifestyle, making sculpture, reconnecting with artist friends, into the competitive and egotistic and neurotic and status-oriented world of art again. And at the same time into my own private and self-sufficient and no longer success-hungry peaceable inner world of discovery and frustration and excitement, being with my partner, gardening (it's supposed to become a sculpture garden but the plants have an equal role), family, friends, sport. It is all so different, and it has been very sad saying goodbye to so many good and interesting people.

Shall I be bored? Shall I miss the stimulation, the people, the variety, the challenges? Already the whole pace of things has changed for me; the speed and the pressures come only from my own desires and needs, though the garden, of course, exerts its own pressures as the seasons inexorably proceed.

I've been ill recently; only for a few days, but suddenly there was nothing but now. I can't remember a time when illness didn't mean letting someone down, changing schedules, anxiety to get well again as fast as possible. So is that what retirement is going to be like? The freedom to be ill? The freedom to be lazy (that almost scares me to write it!), I had freedom once before, many years ago when my children grew up and left home. I couldn't hack it; I had to fill up my life with work, with exhibitions, with timetables, with pressures.

Now I'm older and have all those qualities my colleague's seventy-year counsellor had: calmness, objectivity, a lifetime's experience. Are these enough to cope with freedom? Will I start to feel guilty - I've spent years getting rid of guilt - but have I really the right to please myself in such a sad world? Does my self-esteem depend on being useful? It used to. Do I particularly need or want or even care about self enough to need to esteem me? Who knows; these are such counsellorish things. I never heard of self-esteem as being particularly important before counselling training; maybe now I'm free of that it may not be important. I can avoid these issues by being ill, of course. That's a familiar script for me. And old age will no doubt bring illness-like excuses for not doing things. I've already got plenty of exemplars on how to use these to justify a feeble non-existence. And I don't even have to conjure up an inner Critic to push me into or out of that state, I can be cross with myself if I like.

So cheerio AHPP. I appreciated you. I've already left BAC and I'm not missing them at all. I'll still be in AHP(B) until the millennium - and sometimes feel as if I've been in it since the last one. I'll still get *Self and Society*: I do miss the way it used to be printed on a gestetner; it was much madder and scarier and terribly exciting in those days. So was I. Maybe when I've finished this complicated happy sad process of ending my career as a therapist I can go mad and scary again.

**Watch this space!**

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