

# Counselling into the millennium and the role of AHPP: an Interview with John Rowan by Maggie Lomax

John Rowan has been a counsellor and psychotherapist in the field of humanistic psychology since the late 1960s. He has been Chair of AHP(B), co-founded AHPP in 1980, and has been instrumental in the men's movement. He has published many books on humanistic therapy, - "Ordinary Ecstasy", "The Reality Game", "Healing the Male Psyche", "Subpersonalities" and "The Transpersonal in Counselling and Psychotherapy" amongst them - giving him a leading voice on the subject in the UK.

Having joined the AHPP less than two years ago, and the Ethics Committee later that year, I have always been fascinated by the way this organisation has evolved, particularly with its emphasis on humanistic practice within organisational procedures. This seems to me to fly in the face of a lot of other professional organisations which become more legalistic and rule-bound the bigger and older they get. I think it is important that we abide by a set of beliefs and codes with which to protect our clients and ourselves, but that when things go wrong we should act with kindness and compassion both to those who have made mistakes and those who have been bruised by them. This is a hard path to tread, and worthy of continual monitoring and challenge, but I don't believe we should ever lose the principle of modelling process as well as practice. It still delights me that we can find time before AHPP meetings to have a check-in of who we are and how we're feeling, and that our Ethics

Committee has an empty chair to symbolise the watching brief of the Core Beliefs Statement, to remind us all to be vigilant about the need for update and revision as it arises.

I thought the millennium was as good a time as any to reflect on such beginnings and evolution, and cast our minds back to how we have got to where we are now, especially if we weren't personally around in the counselling world in 1980 when this movement began. So John Rowan seemed an obvious choice to aid these musings, not only because he was a founder member of AHPP, but also because he has written many books useful for budding and fully flowering counsellors and therapists. Personally I have always found his works accessible and practical, and I like John's user-friendly way with language. Nowadays I recommend them to my own counselling students. It also occurred to me that we see so many of his reviews and pieces in this

magazine, that it would bring him more alive to readers who have only read his criticisms of others' works and views. So, on a blustery November morning, I met John, whom I found courteous and friendly, with the sort of air of authority that left me relieved that I knew what both he and I were talking about, as I felt he would need to respect the intelligence of his interlocutor and wouldn't take kindly to anyone trivialising his field of expertise. The following is a record of our conversation.

## Changes in the practice of therapy: risks and fears

I asked John Rowan what he saw as the main changes in the practice of therapy since his involvement in counselling and psychotherapy. He recalls that in the 1970s there was a huge emphasis on the use of catharsis as a therapeutic outcome, particularly in groups. In many groups the expression of strong feelings, especially anger, was encouraged, with the group leader holding the authority to impose this as a way of being. John remembers being in a group where someone caught the edge of the iron bedstead while beating a mattress, and actually broke his arm. For many practitioners taking risks was a necessary precondition to pursuing personal growth. An extreme example of this was when Paul Lowe, a follower of Rajneesh (now known as Osho) set up a six-month residential group in Italy where the participants were obliged to commit to pushing each other to their limits in order to test themselves. Along with these extremes of therapeutic method came a far

different attitude to boundaries between facilitators and clients from that which therapists are used to accepting as a norm today. John remembers that there was far more latitude emotionally and sexually, and that it wasn't uncommon for group leaders to run weekend workshops and select a sexual partner for the night from amongst the participants; nor did this seem in any way objectionable to the group. John's view is that it wasn't until Alice Miller started having an influence in the mid 80's that there was any notion that therapy or the relationship between client and therapist could be abusive. Now everybody has become much more cautious in their dealings with clients, and the extent that power can be used and abused in the therapeutic relationship is well recognised. I asked John if he thought we had lost something by developing this caution. He thinks that we could easily slide into the climate of fear that is prevalent in today's society, where children are conveyed to school by car and women are afraid to walk alone at night, despite the fact that statistical evidence attests that there is little risk in these activities. We have lost something of value if our fear leads us to developing so many rules and boundaries for counselling and psychotherapy that we are afraid to be different or take any risks.

## The founding of AHPP

I wondered what had prompted the founding of AHPP and asked John about his place in its history. He told me that in the late seventies some of the sorts of excesses described above came into the public gaze. The Minister of Health convened a meeting to discuss

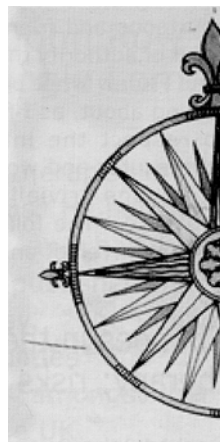
a report from Australia on the depredations of Scientology. Although this is not directly connected to counselling or psychotherapy, some of the techniques it used were similar to those of co-counselling (especially Harvey Jackins' Re-evaluation Co-counselling), and borrowed from psychological theory about patterning in the brain. This was, as John says, 'not in our field but close enough to feel the breeze', so he and others set up the Rugby Standing Committee on Psychotherapy in an attempt to set their own house in order. Along with John Heron, Alix Pirani, Ari Badaines and others, John negotiated with AHP(B) to join as a body of practitioners, developing their own byelaws in order to become accepted constitutionally as part of the existing organisation. They developed a programme and criteria for accreditation through which they put themselves, and there was a lot of interaction between them and the BAC, with each organisation helping the other with its accreditation process.

## The Transpersonal: supervision, spirits and alien abductions

Asked about the place of the transpersonal within the humanistic tradition, John thought that it may be regarded as part of humanistic therapy, although some commentators see it as a "fourth force": psychoanalytic theories being the first; cognitive/behavioural theories being the second; and humanistic theories being the third. If it is not integrated into humanistic therapy it can become somewhat airy-fairy, too devoted to symbols, dreams and psychic

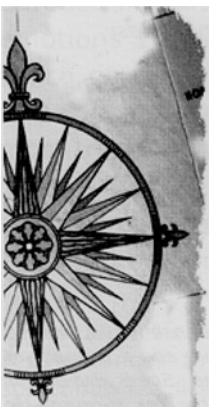
experiences, and John is a bit suspicious of that. His opinion is that, in fact, many works on transpersonal therapies concern humanistic theory and practice. For instance, Ferrucchi's book *'What we may be'*, on the theories and techniques of psychosynthesis, a recognised transpersonal therapy, contains roughly 80% humanistic content, and this is true of other works in this therapy. A helpful perspective for him in dealing with the transpersonal dimension is Petruska Clarkson's Five Relationships model, whereby the different elements of the therapeutic relationship, namely the working alliance, the transference, the authentic person to person, the reparative, and the transpersonal, to some extent co-exist. Within this the transpersonal has a safe place.

I asked John his views on transpersonal supervision. These are that, in connecting with transpersonal experiences, we may as therapists have to be able to cope with people who have archetypal visions, out of body experiences, visitations from spirit entities, channelling of devils and who knows what else. This means that our supervisors also need to be equipped to deal with such experiences. An open-minded approach means that we are more



likely to understand how different symbols and life experiences have meanings other than those that are determined by our own culture. The advantage of this is that it can lead to a greater ability to cope with transcultural problems such as may be experienced by refugees, asylum seekers and members of ethnic communities. John sees the need for an expansion in this work: at the moment clients from these groups are thin on the ground.

Regarding my question of whether we should expect to prepare ourselves for working with clients who claim to have been abducted by aliens, as many



believe in the USA, John sees the best line with a client relating such phenomena as that of spiritual emergency. Stan Grof, in his book *'The Stormy Search for the Self'* describes ten such emergencies, including alien abductions and encounters with

ghosts and other spirits. The client could be encouraged to work through the experience as a spiritual gift, to make the most of something that could benefit their life, discovering the deep meaning of this event for themselves. As with therapy generally, John thinks it is important not to feed into the culture of fear by stimulating paranoia and colluding with conspiracy theories: these would be unhelpful

approaches. Nothing human is beyond our scope. Perhaps, in working within the transpersonal, we need to say that every phenomenon that humans experience can be regarded as divine, and that we need to recognise our own divinity in working with them.

## Therapy and relationships: what is admissible?

I asked John whether he thought that, with our great emphasis now on ethics in training and practice, we had gone too far with our regulations and compromised our spirit of adventure in the interest of personal growth, until we are now too afraid to take any risks in therapeutic relationships. I specifically wondered about his view on post-therapy sexual relationships. John says that he does not have a strong view, although he thinks that it is an open and shut case that dual relationships should not take place while the therapy continues. Various organisations have set time limits after which it is regarded as ethical to enter a sexual relationship with an ex-client: two years, five years, even thirteen weeks at one stage of the BAC's history, but it is hard to defend a time limit per se.

He sees transference as being the crux of the matter. The more a therapy relies on transference as the main therapeutic tool, the more likely it is that a change of relationship is likely to cause problems, as the issues of undue psychological influence, and perhaps a parental relationship, will not have been resolved. He sees that humanistic therapies, however, do not depend on transference, but acknowledge its existence openly in an effort to undermine it and therefore

stop it becoming an issue that interferes with the process. The logic, then, is that if the client continues therapy until they reach a clear place, there should be no reason why a different kind of relationship, including a sexual one, could not take place after time.

The trouble is that many clients finish therapy for practical reasons, such as moving to another town, and that clear place is not reached. John thinks that, if there is a possibility that a sexual relationship could eventually result, a two year cooling off period might be a guideline. There would be good arguments for consultation with a non-partisan outsider or body such as POPAN (Prevention of Professional Abuse Network), so that all angles in the relationship would be explored to ensure that harm did not result to the former client. All in all, John thinks that it is a difficult subject to make hard and fast rules about. Whatever people decide in these instances, there needs to be a path of safety and reason that they follow.

## Hopes and fears for the new millennium

John's fear is that there is a danger that the demands on humanistic therapy from health trusts, insurance companies, accountants and managed care, could result in everything we do being weighed and measured, to the extent that our professions become elitist, rather than dealing with the lives of most people. He thinks it would be sad if this were to happen.

If therapy is to become merely concerned with the ridding of symptoms, adjustment to society and reality as ordinarily perceived could

become its sole goals. However, there is another form of therapy, about death, rebirth, and liberation, and if we are to engage in that, then we need to resist attempts to over-regularise our efforts. This is an exciting challenge if we are brave enough to face it.

### Further reading:

Alice Miller: *Thou Shalt Not be Aware*, Pluto, 1985.

Personal Counselors Inc.:

*Fundamentals of Co-counselling*

*Manual*, Rational Island, Seattle, 1962

Piero Ferrucci: *What We May Be*, (Turnstone Press, Wellingborough), 1982.

Petruska Clarkson: *The Therapeutic Relationship*, (Whurr, London), 1995.

John Rowan: *Ordinary Ecstasy*, (Routledge, London), 1988.

Christina and Stanislav Grof: *The Stormy Search for the Self*, (Tarcher, Los Angeles), 1990.

Prevention of Professional Abuse Network can be contacted on 0171-622 6334.

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*She is in the early stage of research into post-therapy sexual relationships, and would welcome news of any issues of this nature that clients have brought to you. She can be contacted either at the Social Studies Dept., University College, Bishop Otter Campus, College Lane, Chichester, PO19 4PE; by telephone at home on 023 80 788110; or on e-mail at MagLomax@AOL.com.*