PITCHING YOUR TENT IN THE DESERT

Trish Munn

'I will lead her into the wilderness, there to speak to her heart.' Hosea, ch.2

Last night I dreamt that I was in the early stages of pregnancy. I was baffled since I knew within the dream that I was too old for this to be possible. Besides I am barren. Yet there I was with child. I could feel the outline of my womb – a small protrusion that I could stroke, and to which I could offer protection. I have to say I was relieved when I awoke and realised that this was only a dream – and yet there was also some sense of reality to this unformed child.

I thought of Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, who like myself was barren. Nevertheless at a very advanced age she gave birth to a son, later to be known as John the Baptist. I love to read the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth after she found herself to be pregnant. As Mary greets her and tells her the news of her pregnancy, the older woman responds, 'As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.' This is a beautiful affirmation which acknowledges our primary patterning that begins at conception. Lovely to imagine these two babies communicating from the womb. It gives a very tangible sense of our interconnectedness.

John the Baptist lived as a hermit in the desert of Judea and must have known the terrain better than most. From an early age he chose to live out his life in this wilderness, preparing the way for others. We have from John the line, 'I must decrease in order that he may increase.' John here is literally speaking of the person of Jesus, but I hope it is possible to read these lines from other traditions or no tradition at all, with a small leap and a large mind. Today's Christian might

frame this as Christ mind, and a Buddhist might frame it as Buddha nature. In the same way that Buddhism and the Tao value emptiness, 'More like 'everything' than it is like 'nothing.' Like the hub of a wheel or the hollow of a cup, it is the empty space that makes things useful,' John is recognising that in order to prepare the way for others, he needs to become emptier of small self. Is this not also the desire of the therapist? That ultimately, without desire, without aim, without use, she may be of service in the empty space of beingness.

The ground that I want to explore is more usually termed the existential. Irving Yalom says that 'Existential psychotherapy is rather much a homeless waif. It does not really belong anywhere. It has no homestead, no formal school, no institution; it is not welcomed into the better academic neighbourhoods, no stable family, no paterfamilias. It does however have a genealogy, a few scattered cousins, and friends of the family.'

I'd like to get to know this homeless waif better; this waif who lives in each of us and who may find themselves at some point lost for a long time in the desert, with no sense of belonging, no sense of meaning and no direction. This can be very fearful territory where the sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness can be completely overwhelming. There are very few road-maps or signposts, and the few there are do not readily invite. And yet there is an invitation here. This waste-ground that can appear as barren as Elizabeth believed herself to be, is also teeming with life. It offers huge fecundity if one is prepared to stick around for a while, perhaps a longer while than one might want.

I remember hearing a Jewish rabbi saying that when he travels, staying in different hotels or guest-houses, he first sits in his room and gets acquainted with the four walls; the wall-paper; the furniture and objects, the smells. He continues to sit and wait until he gets to know the *feel* of it. By going through this process he would gradually find his bearings and re-orient himself. It would take a long time, just sitting and making friends with his surroundings.

In the joint relationship between client and therapist, we can take this time to explore the particular ground in which we find ourselves; to slow down enough in order to rest in the gaps between the cracks, in the pause between in-breath and out. It can give us the opportunity to see for ourselves the unfolding flora and fauna of the wilderness, and to realise that far from being barren it is hugely fertile.

For myself, what has been the most frightening aspect of this existential ground is that on a feeling level *there is no ground*. It's bit like a sudden descent or entrance into pure nothing, or bareness. There are no words of description and it can best be communicated by metaphor, or by an astonished and complete silencing. This very silence, far from coming out of a place of emptiness and rest, screams in its terror and isolation. Munch's painting, *The*

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Scream comes to mind. Its wide recognition indicates that this territory is well or partly known by most of us. This is the place where we meet the 'four givens' of existentialism in their various disguises or in their utter nakedness: death, isolation, meaninglessness and freedom. It is not my intention at this point to speak of the particularities of these givens since I want to stay a bit longer with the flavour and feel of the ground. How for instance, do you recognise that you might be walking in this territory? Words arise such as desolation, despair, hopelessness, alienation. A sense of anxiety that underpins your very being, and that often has little correlation with what might be happening in your external life. A sense of the abyss that if you haven't yet fallen into, surrounds you on all sides as you stand perpetually on the edge. If you can resonate with the voice of the psalmist,

'I have sunk into the mud of the deep,

and there is no foothold.

I have entered the waters of the deep

and the waves overwhelm me.

I am wearied with all my crying,

my throat is parched.

My eyes are wasted away,'

we have probably had some sense of the desert experience. It can feel like a deep bleak depression, and doubtless this is often the 'diagnosis,' which is a great pity since this could be denying a hugely important potential for transformation. At the same time as the more dramatic intense qualities, there can also be a

quality of such utter flatness and futility that in giving it a name at all seems like nonsense. It is all so utterly drab and ordinary.

In the Old Testament the desert is the key symbol for liberation. When Moses was charged by God to liberate his people, it was to lead them into the desert 'to celebrate.' Not much celebration took place it seems. The Hebrews yearned for the fleshpots of Egypt, for the fixed home, for the poor yet guaranteed food. They accuse Moses of bringing them into the wilderness to die of hunger. Some of the main symbols of the Jewish festivals have their origin in the connection with the desert. The unleavened bread is the bread of wanderers, ready to leave at any minute. The suka (tabernacle) is the home of the wanderer, the equivalent of a tent, easily built and easily taken down. As defined in the Talmud it is the 'transitory abode,' to be lived in, instead of the fixed abode one owns.

The Hebrews were right. This is an invitation to die. To die to fixed abodes, fixed ideas of who they were, fixed patterns of behaviour and fixed habits and tendencies. This same invitation is extended to each one of us. The heroic journey through the desert is a place of transformation.

> *'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'*

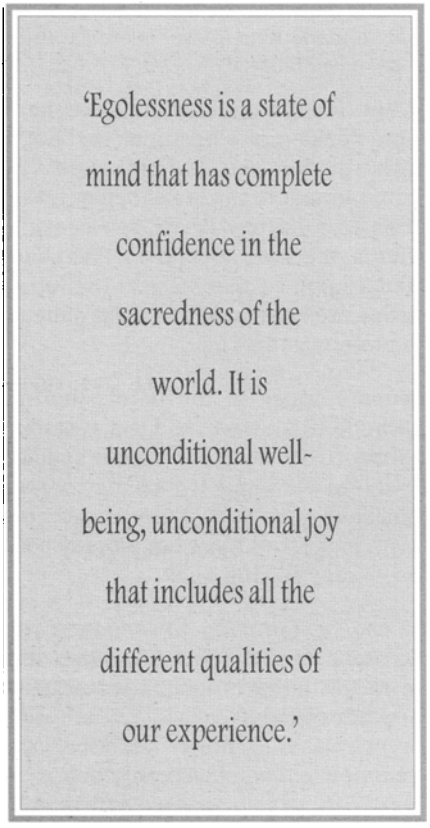
All the major religious traditions invite us to die to our small ego selves in order that we might live in the greater reality within; that is, of entering our true nature where 'beingness' is our natural state.

> *'Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.'*

When Jesus says, 'for my sake' he is not speaking of a personal 'my' but is asking for a life marked by commitment to the life of being, rather than to a narrow life of self-seeking. This is where we will find our liberation; and though I speak here in the future tense, we know that this state of being is already within us.

When I speak of the heroic journey through the desert, and the invitation to die to small ego, I would suggest that in some sense (which may or may not have been fully experienced on a conscious level) there has already been an assent to this.

It can be tempting to language this territory as the The Dark Night, and in fact it often is languaged as such and does kind of 'get it.' On a feeling level this very much describes the experience. I would like to make some clarification as I understand it: The Dark Night of the Soul, so clearly described by the 16th century Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross, is preceded by what he calls the Night of the Senses. Without going into it in detail here, in order to have some sense of the signposts of where you are, it is the Night of the Senses that is 'under attack' so to speak when we enter the desert. To state it briefly this will begin a time when all the usual pleasures that formerly supported and 'made life worth living' fade away. What used to give meaning, whether it be work, music, food, dreams, sex – anything that supported the senses, no longer gives any satisfaction, and the individual is



thrown into an unfamiliar and arid place which leave them floundering. The ground has metaphorically shifted beyond recognition. This can also be termed in the language of 'mid-life crisis' since it usually though certainly not always, happens when we begin to have a stronger sense of our mortality and of time running out. Or perhaps some external event such as illness, relationship break-up or job loss, has capitulated us into this territory. Whether we are in the active drama of it or in bleak meaninglessness, it can be very frightening and needs to be tenderly held by the therapist.

I would suggest that anyone who begins a life of prayer and meditation, anyone who is seeking union with the divine and with one another, anyone who undertakes a training in a transpersonal therapy, will at some point undergo this bitter territory. In a culture that is dominated by consumerism and the market-place, the individual undergoing this experience can truly feel like an exile on the very ground once known so well. And like the Hebrews who longed again for the fleshpots, we will often wish that we'd never been drawn to this path. It can be a long period of unknowing, loss and despair.

Jack Kornfield describes the state clearly when he says, 'Traditionally the dark night arises only after we have had some initial spiritual opening. In the first flush of practice, joy, clarity, love and a sense of the sacred can arise, and with them we experience a great excitement at our spiritual progress. However, these states will inevitably pass away. It is as if they arise for us as initial gifts, but then we discover how much discipline and surrender are needed to sustain and live in these realms. Inwardly we often touch the light and then lose it, falling back into separateness, despair or unconsciousness. This may happen many times in the repeated cycles of opening and letting go, of death and rebirth, that mark of our spiritual path. Yet it is this very process of death and rebirth that leads us to freedom.'

It is particularly in this territory that the four existential givens of death, isolation, meaninglessness and freedom can be experienced with an almost unbearable intensity. I don't wish to give the impression that this

ground is only reserved for those who are consciously seeking a spiritual path. I think it's true to say that in some sense the ground of the existential underpins our being however we are living our lives. The choice to avoid the experience or to get acquainted is ours, though on a feeling level, it may seem that 'choice' is not always an option.

Within varying spiritual traditions, it would appear that there are very different paradigms held on hope. In Christianity, 'hope' is one of the theological virtues; hope in the goodness and mercy of God, with the final outcome of eternal life. This might be seen as pinning our hopes on some future time if we can but endure and hold fast in faith. Yet we also hear that the 'Kingdom is now,' and it is within. The now, in present time is all we have, the only ground we have to work in. Being in that ground with the sense of no hope, no exit, and nothing to hold on to is pretty uncomfortable to say the least. The ground is like quicksand. You search the cracks and crannies of your mind for something that will sustain you, but there's nothing. The landscape stretches out like a gaping yawn of eternal aridity, or can become the scene of nuclear fall-out, where at any moment you are about to be annihilated. Annihilation itself becomes the territory.

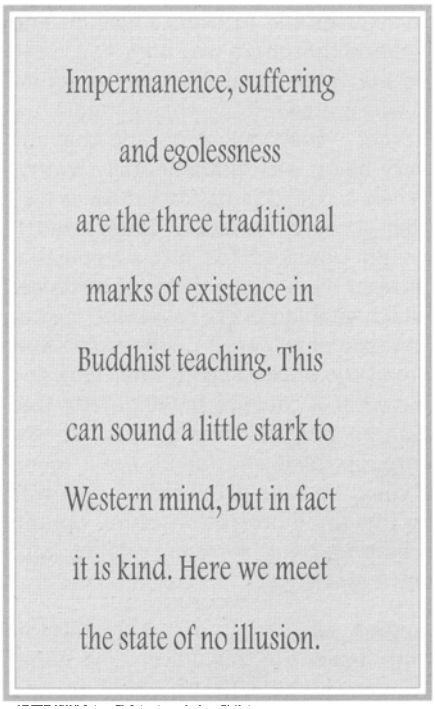
Pema Chodron says that, 'Suffering begins to disslove when we can question the belief or hope that there's anywhere to hide.'

When I first read these uncomforting words I had a sense of utter relief. On my last prolonged sojourn into this territory, what helped me more than anything, was someone else who recognised the territory I was in; and hearing that there was *nothing* I could do about it. I had felt that somehow it was my own fault, that I should 'try harder', 'snap out of it', and that my very being was fundamentally wrong. When I heard it re-framed in a way that I could somehow understand it as an unasked for gift to spiritual growth, there was a sense of surrender which enabled me to relax with it, that 'this too shall pass.' I noticed too how small ego pricked up its small ears and did what it could to try and get a free ride on this 'spiritual growth.' It saw through itself and failed, but I found I could be tender towards it as I was to the small protrusion of my dream. I was learning to make friends with my experience.

It isn't easy for the therapist to sit with a client in this place of no hope; to sense the client's need of any crumbs of comfort and yet withold, since far from helping, those crumbs can hinder the process. It is also important to resist joining the client in the hopelessness, and going into that vortex with them. Someone needs to be holding the health and the value of this experience. The natural inclination is to offer something, anything, to help the client through it – just something that they can hold on to. But this would be buying in to our own need to feel better, to feel useful, and could deny the client this place of transformation.

There's a Tibetan word: *ye tang che.* It translates as being 'totally exhausted' or we might say, totally fed up; a complete sense of hopelessness, of giving up hope.

Pema Chodron says that 'This is the beginning of the beginning. Without giving up hope - that there's



somewhere better to be, that there's someone better to be – we will never relax with where and who we are.'

In Western culture with its emphasis on achieving and having, it is easy to lose the ability to simply be who we are and to know that that is enough. Our very sense of who we are seems never to be enough.

Chodron goes on to say that 'All anxiety, all dissatisfaction, all hoping that our experience could be different are rooted in our fear of death. Fear of death is always in the background.'

There's something about hope that I wrestle with; I am not quite comfortable with the complete giving up of it, and at the same time hear it's truth.

Almaas talks about hope as being a part of psychological activity, or ego activity. He makes a distinction between psychological activity which is the dynamic centre of the ego self with the main components being hope, desire and rejection – and the fundamental dynamic wholeness which is an evolutionary force which has the *a priori* property of functioning as an 'optimizing force.' What I understand by this in simple terms, is that there's a difference between *hope* which is within our authentic drive to wholeness, and is an essential part of our very being – and hope that is lost sight of when it is within the experience of ego-self, and which then disconnects us from direct contact with our essence. We are then hoping from the wrong place so to speak. As Eliot says in his poem Eat Coker, 'I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing.'

As someone who practises a transpersonal therapy and who will see clients from varying backgrounds, I have to ask myself the question: How may I be with someone who is as yet perhaps not much aware of the spiritual dimension of their crisis? How may the client feel held enough in this territory without a felt support (whether of presence or absence) of the larger picture, the sacred (however that is perceived)? Can I be delicate enough, tender enough to hold their perceptions, to see how they might be creating their own suffering, and yet hold back? When I ask myself these questions, trust in 'brilliant sanity' is what comes to my mind. I need to touch into (and let go of) my own psychohistory where I become

'the one who helps.' What does brilliant sanity really mean to me? In my language might I call it God? (I might.)

I read something the other day about fishes swimming in their natural element of water. It is so utterly their element that they wouldn't be aware of it (forgive me all fishes if I'm assuming a lack of awareness out of my own ignorance!). In the same way it could be said that brilliant sanity is so much our natural element that we may not recognise it. I don't need to be the one who helps – the help – our brilliant sanity is there all the time. Obscured perhaps just as the water can be for the fish if it has become polluted. However the essence of the water is pure.

What has all this to do with sitting with someone who's in the existential territory? I heard another therapist express it as being in 'trust territory.' I think this describes it well.

It can be hard to remember or to truly believe that we are held in the essence of pure love. That this is our element, we are not separate from it; we swim in it and it swims in and around us. When we are led into the experience of the desert, that sense of love is not what we feel with our senses. Now is the time that the senses are being purified, and we become lost without those which we once knew. Trust territory is indeed where we are as our world as we've known it, falls apart.

Impermanence, suffering and egolessness, are the three traditional marks of existence in Buddhist teaching. This can sound a little stark to Western mind, but in fact it is kind. Here we meet the state of no illusion. If we can surrender into that, not try to change it for something better, but stay with the experience just as it is in the moment, we will notice that impermanence is kind. We will notice that suffering will cease when we cease to try and change the experience, and as we are willing to die a little as we let go of our lop-sided view of reality.

> *'Egolessness is a state of mind that has complete confidence in the sacredness of the world. It is unconditional well-being, unconditional joy that includes all the different qualities of our experience.'*

If we can make friends with all the qualities of our experience as we wait without hope but with trust in the wilderness; if, with shaky confidence we can believe that we are led in love; if we can make friends with this terrible, awesome groundless landscape, and stay there with courage and kindness to ourselves, the place of liberation will ultimately be celebrated. Our warrior selves may never reach the end of the journey but that is no longer the goal. The journey itself is all there is, and we're all in it together.

Further Reading

Almaas, E.H. *The Point of Existence*, Shambhala

Chodron, P. *When Things Fall Apart*, Shambhala

Kornfield, J. *A Path With Heart*, Rider

Yalom, I. *Existential Psychotherapy*, BasicBooks

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