

Psychotherapy and Soul

Guy Dargert

What relation has the secular profession of psychotherapy to matters of soul? Soul is traditionally the province of religion. In our culture our view of soul is particularly coloured by the Christian religion. Soul is normally understood to refer to an immortal component of our being that is capable of surviving our physical death. It is thought to be capable of entering into some kind of afterlife.

I want to put this notion of soul to one side and concentrate instead on an older notion of the nature of soul which derives from the culture of ancient Greece. It is contained within the word 'psychotherapy' itself and therefor seems like a valid line of exploration. The modern word 'psychotherapy' is borrowed from two Greek words '*psyche*' and '*therapia*'. The archetypal psychotherapist James Hillman has explored the nuances of these two Greek words. He says that *psyche* has three meanings. The meanings of *psyche* are 'soul', 'breath', or 'butterfly'. When we think of *psyche* in this third sense we become

aware of the ephemeral or 'butterfly-like' nature of the *psyche*. It is difficult to grasp, elusive, unpredictable, colourful and attractive. The only way to 'pin it down' is to rob it of its life. This is a demand which today's 'public accountability' movement makes with increasing vehemence. Many in our movement regard the compliance with these demands to be a sign of 'maturity'. The idea of *psyche* as breath is an interesting one. It implies that *psyche* is in equal measures something that is outside of us as much as it is within us. The Cartesian notion of the *psyche* 'located' within us (perhaps in the pineal gland) is

quite out of step with the Greek idea. We can easily control and regulate our breath for the duration of our conscious attention span. However the breath or the psyche is also a force outside of our control. It will live us if we do not live it. Its autonomy needs to be appreciated. The ultimate approach to psyche according to this Greek conception might well be through the sometimes derided 'rebirthing' approach, its other alternatives such as Grof breathing or perhaps through Buddhist meditation rather than through the bodies of intellectual theories and practical techniques that we normally think of as psychotherapy.

The notion that psyche is equally inside and outside of us is one which has some interesting parallels with recent discoveries in micro biology. Investigations into the nature of tiny components of our cells called 'mitochondria' indicate that they have an evolutionary history quite separate to that of our own. Mitochondria have something of the nature of tiny batteries that provide the energy to power the lives of our cells. We are drawn to the unfamiliar notion that the mitochondria combined with the 'friendly' organisms that inhabit our skin and gut greatly outnumber the cells that carry our own DNA. Over half of our body weight can be accounted for by cells of non human origin. 'Foreign' cells outnumber our own by an astonishing ratio of ten to one. Most of what we are is not of our own making. We are more like a ruling minority in our own physical bodies. Biologically we relate to the world more in the nature of an embryo to a mother's womb than as the separated disconnected beings we often imagine ourselves to be. Every

breath is an exchange of inner and outer material. We like to imagine that we are at the apex of evolution, yet at the same time we function as but one of innumerable species of animal that serve the function of mopping up dangerous amounts of corrosive and combustible oxygen that would otherwise destroy life on earth. We breathe that the atmosphere may be replenished for plants. Perhaps we and the plants serve as externalised organs of one another? What we are in a physical sense belongs nowhere other than here where it is found. The notion of psyche and of breath is equally as inclusive of the world.

Secondly we have the word *therapia* which means 'attendance' but which also has three nuances associated with it. These are 'to wait on', 'to wait for' and to 'give devoted attention to'. The prime thing required of a psychotherapist according to this etymological interpretation of the word is to 'give attention' or to be fully present. There is nothing in the word that implies a body of clever techniques or elaborate theories. The task is an existential one. 'Be there'. Nor do we control - we wait on a process that unfolds how it will. We serve rather than lead with our expertise. We 'wait for'. We do not set time limits. We are 'patient' The 'client' also is required to become a 'patient' and wait for the process to move on if it will. We give our 'devotion'. What are we devoted to? Perhaps we are devoted to the 'psychotherapeutic process'. Put in terms less mental and abstract and more in harmony with the emotional response suggested by the word 'devotion' this could be understood as attending to the work of what was once known as 'the gods'. In either

case we must realise that it is neither us nor the client who is 'in charge' but something beyond, or more essential than either of us. This is something of the nature of psychotherapy as suggested by the derivation of the word we use to describe that activity we do.

How do we come to grips with this description of the nature of soul in our culture? We have a long history of splitting the within from the without, the life of spirit from the life of matter, subjectivity from objectivity? I like to think of the term 'soul' as a way of conceiving of a grounded spirituality. By this I mean a spirituality that does not desire to evaporate into a Celestine new age heaven as a reward for the trials of living on earth. The alchemists of the middle ages perhaps had this in mind with their maxim '*Bellica pax, vulnus dulce, suave malum*' or 'A warring peace, a sweet woundedness, an agreeable evil'. Peace, pleasure and the sweetness of life are enjoyed but all is accepted and accommodated. Nothing is rejected. There is no split between world and spirit. The world is experienced as *anima mundi* or soul made manifest. The Buddhists have a similar conception in their idea of the *Sukhavati* heaven. This is not a remote other world but it is this world when everything in it is experienced as an opportunity to become enlightened. There is no need for anything other than what we have. Right now is the most important moment of our lives!

One way of imagining this non dual, worldly spirituality can be illustrated by drawing an analogy with the way we think about time. From a conventional rational scientific perspective we sometimes think of the present moment as a wafer thin line between

two infinitudes. The past stretches endlessly behind us or 'begins' perhaps in a primal 'big bang' inconceivable eons ago. The future too stretches away perhaps never endingly. How fragile and insignificant our moment here on this fleeting planet seems from such a dualistic cosmic perspective! Yet from a less conceptual and more sensual perspective we come to the realisation that *everything* happens in the present moment. Nothing ever has or ever will occur outside of the present moment. Past and future are mere concepts in an eternal present. Anything that matters, matters now.

When we think of soul we think more in this non dual way, the earth and all material things are animated, alive and intelligent. The spirit is no where other than right here and right now. The present moment matters. The 'inner' life is not literally inside our heads or our bodies. It is the inner dimension of all that is both within and around us. Soul life cannot withdraw from the world because the world is its means of becoming real and manifest. If our approach to psychotherapy is one which diminishes the importance of the world or simply ignores the world, then we are missing out on soul, the very heart of our self description.

Guy Dargert practises psychotherapy and supervision privately in West Cornwall. Together with his partner he runs courses with 'The Anima Mundi Centre for Psychotherapy and Soul Work'. These courses aim to cultivate a more world inclusive form of psychotherapy. They draw from elements of experiential and archetypal psychotherapy, shamanism and 'world inclusive' spiritual traditions. He may be contacted on 01736-798076 or at G.Dargert@btinternet.com

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