

# Ruminating upon 'standing by'

Steve Burchell

Rowan has been a stable group of five practitioners for about two years now, since our newest member joined. We meet about every three weeks for two hours in the evening at one or other member's homes. About twice a year we also spend a day together at a weekend allowing us to get into bigger chunks of work.

The evening meetings, always starting with a round of check-ins, are a rich mix indeed. Sometimes one of us requests supervision from the group or from an individual; often there are personal/therapeutic issues requiring support and robust challenge; occasionally one of us presents a model, concept or exercise that they imagine would benefit the group, frequently we share how we currently are with doing this sort of work. So, recently we had a day trying out Byron Katie's Worksheets ([www.thework.org](http://www.thework.org)) some of us are off to do a workshop with Stan Grof, we even have tentative plans to try a sweat lodge as a group. All that sounds very esoteric but we are often happily engaged in the mundane - exploring ethical issues that arise with clients, presenting aspects of our practice that we wish to have scrutinised, IPN business, group admin and so forth. As everyone is on email we produce a brief narrative of the meeting for anyone unable to attend and keep in contact with each other between times. For me it is the one place where aspects of my therapy, supervision, training and daily life can co-exist in an explicitly lovingly challenging environment.

Recently we decided to explore linking with other groups and in that light thought it would be good to first have a couple more members to ensure our ongoingness. The worry was that if we linked and then one or two people moved on over time that a small group might not feel viable and the effort to link would have been wasted.

So we invited a few individuals looking for groups to meet us. This is not an entirely comfortable process for us - it seems to take ages and many meetings are given over to exploring the 'entry process' and the 'new member dynamics' (we don't call them this but hopefully you get the gist).

All this exploration and processing led us recently to revisit the notion of 'standing by'. I must confess that when I first joined (about four or so years ago) I imagined this as 'staking my professional reputation on the quality of another's work'. It felt a very weighty commitment to make. Over time I realised that, for me, it wasn't only their work that I was endorsing but my confidence in them as a person. They could make mistakes but my 'standing by' depended more upon their willingness to learn from those mistakes. Thus part of our ethical statement refers to SEEING AND BEING SEEN. It goes without saying that that realisation brought me both permission (to be uncertain myself) and great challenge (to be more fully my self). Once we had added the layer of 'people' on top of 'practitioners' to the notion of 'standing by' we realised that the standing was not an abstract staking of reputation but a real commitment to be alongside the other, give time and energy to them in helping them resolve their troubles. From time to time we have all given and received support and challenge on both professional and personal issues. I sometimes now have a picture in my mind of me literally standing shoulder to shoulder with another group member with all the shared perspective, closeness and warmth, leaning on for support, permission for safe conflict etc that is conferred.

Wow ! So this group has now a life and energy separate from, but born out of, the network. Despite being anxious about the energy required to link with another group (how could we ever find the time to make it real ??) we are beginning to get a feel for the quantum shift in energetic returns that being a full part of the network might bring.

But we are still with the stage of getting one or two new members and in this I have appreciated yet another nuance to the standing by. In discussing how to respond to a recent prospective member who didn't seem a very right fit we became aware of the 'speaking as individuals' alongside the 'speaking as a group'. Which raises the possibility of standing by a group! We had already had sessions explicitly and methodically working through whether each one of us stood by every other. It was not always the case that everyone did and the working through, when there were queries or doubts, was brilliantly rewarding. It made for very robust relationships. But now there is the possibility that I may not be able to know every member of a link group in such depth as to feel certain of their professional judgement and personal integrity and nor may I need to! I might feel confident enough in that group's process (which I guess must involve a fairly good knowledge of some of the members) that I could continue to 'stand by' them even if they had, for example, a new member I had not met. Thus the notion of linking, which prior to writing these thoughts seemed so difficult, fragile and tenuous, begins to appear a real possibility.