Place: The Lost Dimension in Psychotherapy

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Since I retired as a psychotherapist in April 2000, the most important event in my life has been moving house. I had been living in a small terraced house with no garden near the centre of a town, whereas now I am living in a larger house in the country, with a garden and with countryside all around. The effect on my psychological health has been great. From my windows I can see the trees and the fields; at night I can see the stars. I can walk in the countryside and breathe the clean air. I am aware of the seasons as never before. I feel happy, in a way that would not have been possible before. All this in spite of the fact that I have given up therapy, and have not been doing any 'work' on myself in a psychotherapeutic sense!

This has caused me to reflect on what seems to be a forgotten dimension in psychotherapy: our relationship with the Earth. We inhabit the Earth, it is our home; and yet most writers on psychotherapy seem not to have considered that our relationship with it might affect our psychological development. We share the Earth with a huge variety of non-human animal and plant life, and yet many psychotherapists have overlooked our relationship with the Earth's other inhabitants, and with the landscape that we all inhabit.

Of course I am aware that this is a sweeping statement. Many individual psychotherapists *do* take account of our relationship with the Earth. But it remains true that psychotherapy *as it is taught* contains very few references to this dimension. So far as I am

aware, when Freud looked at a tree, he did not consider that it might have any relevance to his work; and the same can perhaps be said of many other founders of psychotherapy such as Perls, Assagioli and Winnicott. For psychotherapists, there is only Man. Psychotherapy is founded on the belief that we are formed out of our innate human nature and out of our relationship with other people. Only people can affect people.

This view (which Mary-Jayne Rust, 2004, calls the 'anthropocentric' view) is very narrow and solipsistic. It could be said that the two greatest innovators of the nineteenth century were Darwin and Freud; and yet it is as though Freud, who was only three years old when Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, was unaware of Darwin's views, and still clung to a 'creationist' view in which God created Man in his own image, and created the universe to serve him. There is no recognition here that we are the children of the Earth, and that we (like all the Earth's other creatures) have evolved in such a way as to enable us to survive on the surface of this planet.

It is also an ungrounded view, since it literally ignores the ground on which we stand. Human beings are seen as relating to each other as if they were floating in space, rather than grounded in place. No wonder that psychotherapy has been subject to so many conflicting theories, since it lacks the groundedness which would enable it to root its theories in solid reality.

It could be argued that it is also an excessively urban view. (Certainly, in my own case, I became aware of its limitations only when I moved into the country.) Psychotherapy was born in urban Vienna and developed in other urban centres, and so takes little account of people who are living 'closer to the Earth'. But, while this may help to explain the way in which psychotherapy has developed, it does not excuse it. Firstly, although most of us live in towns, our actual residences are often in 'leafy suburbia,' where there are gardens, trees and animals. Secondly, even for those who live in entirely man-made urban surroundings, the physical environment is still of huge importance, and yet has been ignored by psychotherapists.

C.G. Jung, who lived for most of his life in a rural setting, is undoubtedly an exception to this, in that he did not hold to the anthropocentric view. Rust (2004) says: 'Jung claims that his relationship to the earth is the foundation on which all his work rests, and his writings are full of interesting insights about our relationship with nature'. And yet, even in Jung's case, his emphasis on man's relationship to the non-human world seems to have been forgotten – or, at best, regarded as peripheral – by many of his followers: thus, I can find no references to nature, to the Earth, or to relationships with plants and animals (except in the context of dreams), in Fordham's otherwise comprehensive book *Jungian Psychotherapy* (1978). As Roszak (1995, pp.11-12) says, 'at least in its most prominent interpretation, Jung's collective unconscious belongs

wholly to the cultural realm; it is filled, not with the tracks of beasts and the vegetative energies, but with high religious symbols and ethereal archetypes. It is a conception that has more to do with Plato than with Darwin'.

Gallagher (1994, p.14) says: 'Convinced of the therapeutic primacy of insight and inner change, Freudians were sceptical of the idea that altering one's milieu, say, where one lived, might also have merit. That kind of thing was, they said, 'running away from your problems,' even though the people who ran away sometimes felt better.' But in fact, focusing on places as well as people is *not* running away from internal psychological processes. Places live in our minds as vividly as do people, and have equally complex psychological associations. Places can be as important as people in developing and defining the individual's sense of his/her own identity. Relph (1976, pp.38 & 41) says:

'To be attached to places and have profound ties with them is an important need … A deep relationship with places is as necessary, and perhaps as unavoidable, as close relationships with people; without such relationships human existence, while possible, is bereft of much of its significance.'

He also says (p.36):

> 'All places and landscapes are individually experienced, for we alone see them through the lens of *our* attitudes, experiences and intentions, and from our own unique circumstances.'

Thus, in England, as I have said, I feel happier living in the country than in the town; but, when I visited Australia, I felt that the beautiful city of Sydney was more conducive to psychological health than the surrounding countryside, which (for me) carried a hint of desolation and menace. These preferences in part reflect real differences between the places concerned, but they are also the result of my own personal 'attitudes, experiences and intentions'. Other people, with different psychological histories, would respond to the same places differently. The question that needs to be asked is: Which aspects of the environment does this person respond to positively, and which does he/she respond to negatively? Which aspects contribute to feelings of joy and contentment, and which contribute to feelings of depression and fear?

There are, in literature, a number of autobiographical accounts of how people have been deeply affected by their non-human environment. An example is an extract from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1976, p.388), which, although it is presented in fictional form, is in fact autobiographical. Here Robert Pirsig describes how Phaedrus's (that is to say, his own) mental breakdown is hastened by his perception of the city of Chicago (to which he has recently moved from the open spaces of Montana):

> 'The city closes in on him now, and in his strange perspective it becomes the antithesis of what he believes. The citadel not of Quality, the citadel of form and substance. Substance in the form of steel sheets and girders, substance in the form of concrete piers and roads, in the form of brick, of asphalt, of auto parts, old radios, and rails, dead carcasses of animals that once grazed the prairies. Form and substance without Quality. That is the soul of this place. Blind, huge, sinister and inhuman: seen by the light of fire flaring upward from the blast furnaces in the south, through heavy coal smoke deeper and denser into the neon of BEER and PIZZA and LAUNDROMAT signs and unknown and meaningless signs along meaningless straight streets going off into other straight streets forever.'

Pirsig makes it clear that, although the physical environment was not the only cause of Phaedrus's descent into psychosis, it was a very important contributory factor. Essentially, the physical environment was seen as hostile and threatening, causing him to feel imprisoned and helpless. If the physical environment had been different and the human factors had remained the same, he might have been able to retain his sanity. Clearly this has important implications for psychotherapy. Phaedrus was responding to Chicago from his own 'strange perspective', and the exploration of this perspective is central to an understanding of his mental state.

Another example is from James Agee's great book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Agee & Evans, 2001), in which Agee describes how he (a New York journalist and film critic) and the photographer Walker Evans investigated the lives of poor white tenant farmers in the Deep South. At one point Agee tells how he sat down for supper in the house of one of these tenant families. He describes the scene in great detail, and then says (Agee & Evans, 2001, p. 366):

> 'To say, then, how, as I sat between the close walls of this hallway, which opened upon wide night at either end, between these two sombrely sleepy people in the soft smile of the light, eating from unsorted plates with tin-tasting implements the heavy, plain, traditional food which was spread before me, the feeling increased itself upon me that at the end of a wandering and seeking, so long it had begun before I was born, I had apprehended and now sat at rest in my own home, between two who were my brother and sister, yet less that than something else: these, the wife my age exactly, the husband four years older, seemed not other than my own parents, in whose patience I was so different, so diverged, so strange as I was; and all that surrounded me, that silently strove in through my senses and stretched me full, was familiar and dear to me as nothing else on earth, and as if well known in a deep past

> and long years lost; so that I could wish that all my chance life was in truth the betrayal, the curable delusion, that it seemed, and that this was my right home, right earth, right blood, to which I would never have true right'.

This is an example of a profound and life-changing inner experience resulting from an experience of a particular place. Many of us have had such experiences, but few of us can express them in words as fully or as poetically as Agee can. We may feel profoundly moved by a particular place, but be unable to find words to express the meaning of the experience for us. Part of the task of therapy could be to help the client to identify such experiences and to explore their meaning.

Another example of a deep association with place – this time with a place known in childhood – is taken from Wallace Stegner's autobiography *Wolf-Willow*. Stegner writes (1962, pp.21-22):

> 'I still sometimes dream … of a bend of the Whitemud River below Martin's Dam. Every time I have that dream I am haunted, on awaking, by a sense of meanings just withheld, and by a profound nostalgic melancholy … What interests me is the mere fact that this dead loop of a river, known only for a few years, should be so charged with potency in my consciousness … this is still the place toward which my well-conditioned unconsciousness turns like an old horse heading for the barn.'

Here again the implications for psychotherapists are clear. Very many of us have our own 'Whitemud Rivers': that is, we have places, remembered from childhood or from adolescence, which, as Stegner says, are 'charged with potency' in our consciousness. The exploration of the nature and the effects of this potency would seem to be one of the most important tasks in which psychotherapy could engage.

It is also worthwhile to go back in time and to remember that the romantic poets of the early nineteenth century – and especially Wordsworth – did much to open human sensibilities to the importance of connecting with the non-human environment, in a reaction against the culture of the eighteenth century (the 'Age of Reason') in which nature was either ignored or feared. In saying something as simple and childlike as 'And then my heart with pleasure fills,/And dances with the daffodils', Wordsworth was making a revolutionary statement about one of the most important needs of the human psyche. (How often, as psychotherapists, do we allow our clients to dance with the daffodils? How often do we accept that the need to do this – or to remember having done so – might be as important for them as the need to relive childhood traumas?) At around the same time as Wordsworth was writing his nature poetry, Beethoven was composing his Pastoral Symphony and artists such as Constable, Corot and Turner were perfecting the art of landscape painting. Ever since

that time, a belief in the psychological power of places, and especially in the healing power of nature, has been an important strand in Western culture. But the relationship of this strand to other strands has often been problematic. It has been labelled 'romantic,' and therefore seen as not serious. Often it has been seen as nostalgic, linked to an Arcadian vision of rural bliss which is felt to have existed at some time in the past. The countryside is seen as the place where one enjoys leisure pursuits, goes on holiday or takes retirement, and emphatically *not* as the place where one pursues the serious business of making money and of pursuing economic growth, material affluence, and scientific and technological progress. I believe this is an important reason why place-consciousness and nature-consciousness have been shunned by psychotherapy, since psychotherapy has been keen to link itself to the banner of 'progress' and to avoid being seen as escapist or sentimental.

However, there is one newly developing field of work which does attempt to help therapists (and others) to break out of the anthropocentric worldview and to see men and women in the context of their relationship to the Earth and all its creatures. This is the ecopsychology movement. As yet, ecopsychology has made little impact in Britain, but it has many theorists and practitioners in the U.S.A. In Roszak's words (Roszak, 1995, p.5):

> 'Ecopsychology proceeds from the assumption that at its deepest level the psyche remains sympathetically bonded to the Earth that mothered us into existence. Ecopsychology suggests that we can read our transactions with the natural environment – the way we use or abuse the planet – as projections of unconscious needs and desires, in much the same way we can read dreams and hallucinations to learn about our deep motivations, fears, hatreds'.

In pursuit of this, ecopsychologists use a variety of methods, including working with clients 'out in the wild', and employing insights and techniques that may owe more to shamanic traditions and to Native American beliefs and practices than to orthodox psychotherapeutic approaches. They are driven by an intense awareness of the trauma which the planet is now suffering as a result of man's plundering of its resources, and a desire to use psychotherapy (as well as other methods) for the purpose of healing the relationship between mankind and the Earth.

To me this seems admirable, and my only criticism of the ecopsychologists is that I feel that they – or some of them – may be attempting to run before they can walk. In order to practise psychotherapy with an individual client, one has to *start from where the client is now;* and it seems to me that most clients are so far from an ecopsychological worldview that the more radical techniques of the ecopsychologists cannot be easily applied.

Therefore, my own proposal is less radical than that of the ecopsychologists; and yet it is radical enough. My proposal is that psychotherapists should adhere to their existing practices and techniques, but that, within these methods, they should *pay as much attention to places as to people.* Just as, within psychotherapy, we cannot heal the whole of humanity but must focus on this individual client, so also, within psychotherapy, we cannot heal the whole Earth but must focus on particular places, which are simply points (or small areas) on the Earth's surface.

The starting-point would be the realization that, whenever two people meet (and I mean *meet,* rather than talking on the telephone or sending each other texts and emails), there is always a third presence: the *place* in which they meet, whose character will profoundly affect the nature of the interactions between the people. And furthermore, we need to remember that many people (especially the ever-increasing number of people who live in one-person households) spend much of their time without human company. We say that they are 'alone', but, if we abandon the anthropocentric viewpoint, we realize that they are not alone: they are in the presence of the Earth, as manifested in a particular place, and they will interact with that place in complex ways.

This focus on places as well as people would in no way imply a reduction in the complexity or subtlety of the psychological inquiry. The 'personality' (or ambience) of a place is as complex as that of a person, and also as subjective and unknowable, being dependent on the perspective and previous history of the observer. The concept of transference applies to places as much as to people: a place may be seen as pleasant or unpleasant because it subconsciously reminds the client of other places known in childhood. Places may change over time, as people do, and the changes may affect the client's attitudes and behaviour. Traumatic events occurring in particular places will colour the client's subsequent relationship with those places and with other similar places.

One difference between places and people is, of course, that places cannot talk. Therefore, the feelings that a person has about a place are dependent, not on verbal information, but on information received through the five senses. Sight, sound, smell and touch – and even possibly taste – will all contribute to the image that a person has of a place and to the feelings that the place evokes. Psychotherapy may be the 'talking cure,' but I feel that anything that helps to move the client away from a reliance on purely verbal input, and helps her towards a more rounded awareness of the complex ways in which she relates to her environment, is bound to be beneficial.

Thus, I am proposing that as much attention should be paid to the client's non-human environment as to his or her human environment. This would be shown, for instance, in the therapist's investigation of the client's childhood. In what kind

of house was the client raised, and in what kind of district? How much noise and pollution was there in the environment? How much contact did the child have with animals and plants? Were there any house moves, and how were these moves experienced by the client? And, above all, how did the client feel about all these things?

The same attention would be paid to the client's present home environment: the people, the animals, the buildings, the green spaces, the traffic, and any other factors that seemed relevant. Particular attention would be given to the experience of moving house. Clients could perhaps be encouraged to bring to the session photographs of their homes or of their previous homes, or to draw sketch maps of the area. The therapist would enquire about the meaning of the word 'home' for the client, and would investigate the tension between the need for rootedness and familiarity (which can manifest as homesickness, or as fear of the unknown) and the need for freedom and exploration (which can manifest as a feeling of being imprisoned by an over-familiar environment).

The same attention could be given to the work environment, and to the experience of travelling to and from work. Also, the therapist would be interested to hear about other places (away from home and work) which carried particular meaning for the client, or in which the client had had life-changing experiences.

The therapist would also be willing to explore the significance of place in the client's dreams. (In my own dreams, of which a frequent theme is getting lost, I often create complex imaginary townscapes, complete with networks of streets, shopping centres, bus routes and railway networks. Such dream landscapes remain, so far as I know, unexplored in psychotherapy.)

Finally, the therapist would also pay attention to the environment in which he/she sees the client, and to the similarities and contrasts between this environment and the home and work environments of the client. (I know, from my own experience as a client, that the therapist's working environment can have a profound effect on the therapy: but in my own therapy this was never openly discussed. One therapist saw me in a dark and cluttered room, with the curtains drawn to keep out the sunlight, inducing in me feelings of hopelessness and despair. Another therapist saw me in a light and airy room, on top of a hill and with a view of a beautiful garden: I always felt uplifted by the sessions that were held in this place, but had difficulty in holding on to this feeling when I descended from the therapy room into the 'real world'.)

I have written as though the client's relationships with places were separate from his/her relationships with people, but in fact they are inextricably intertwined. People are known within particular environments, and are seen as belonging to those environments. For instance, I had a client whose parents had lived for forty years in the same small terraced

house, and for all that time had carried out the same inflexible daily rituals: his feelings about his parents were inseparable from his feelings about the (as he saw it) drab and imprisoning environment in which they lived. Similarly, Agee's intense experience (in the passage quoted above) was a response both to the physical environment and to the people who inhabited it.

Thus, a focus on place is simply an extension of the focus on people which is normal in psychotherapy; but it *grounds* the people, it places them in their proper relationship to the Earth which we all inhabit. And I believe also that, by focusing on place, the therapy itself can be more fully grounded. By staying close to the Earth, it will also stay close to reality.

I believe that many – if not most – psychotherapists would be able, without great difficulty, to integrate this emphasis on place into their work, and that this would be welcome to the great majority of clients. As I have already argued, a belief in the power of place to affect human thoughts and feelings has been an inherent part of our culture, at least since Wordsworth's time, even though it has been mostly ignored in psychotherapy. To bring this belief out into the open would be to address something that was already present, maybe at a subconscious level, in the minds of both therapist and client.

And I believe that this focus on place is an essential first step towards addressing the wider issue of mankind's relationship with the Earth. I agree with the ecopsychologists about the increasing urgency of the environmental crisis, but I believe that, as psychotherapists, we have to start by bringing into consciousness the client's existing relationship with the part of the Earth that he or she now inhabits. We need to do this in a spirit of reverence for the great goddess Gaia and for her beauty, majesty and power; and we need to remember that we are all her children.

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