

AHP AGM 2011

Meeting Your Animal

I must confess that although I had a responsibility as Treasurer to attend the AHP AGM, my motivation was more selfish. I wanted to meet old friends, and make new, which indeed I did, and particularly to attend Julian Nangle's workshop on 'meeting your animal'. As soon as Julian said, 'find a space and make yourself comfortable' I knew that I was going to have a good experience.

Listening to Julian's quiet confident tones was calming in itself, and as I sank into a trance I realised how little I allow myself to experience my inner space in my busy life. Once I was relaxed, Julian flew me round the world, gazing at this beautiful earth which we inhabit. When I eventually landed on the ground I found myself, to my delight, in a Sussex meadow, bordered by woodland, in early summer. I was not aware of being anyone but myself, and when Julian instructed us to look at our feet I was surprised to see big grey paws, and at that moment I was a big cat. I lay on the ground and listened to the noises around me, the wind in the trees, the little animals creeping through the undergrowth (lunch!), the birds carolling in the branches (dinner!). I listened to my inner self, who whispered empowering truths to me. I had the power to be the cat that walks by itself, and was aware of my self-sufficiency, my independence, and my strength to walk my own path.

I was reluctant to come out of my trance, especially as Julian then asked us to draw our experience. I consider myself a person not able to draw, and I was delighted with my picture of a recognisable flower-filled Sussex meadow, surrounded by woodland, and a powerful, relaxed cat, entirely at home in her body. Sharing my experience with my neighbour, hearing about her journey and comparing our experiences, was a satisfying way to return to the world.

Thank you so much, Julian.

Judith Furnier

Andrew Samuels and Ernesto Spinelli

October 2nd, 2011

Attended The Association for Humanistic Psychology's (AHPB – www.ahpb.org) one day conference entitled The Individual and Identity yesterday, at The Resource Centre in Holloway Road, London. (www.resourcecentre.org.uk). Guest speakers were Andrew Samuels and Ernesto Spinelli – two heavyweights in the current throng of psychology thinkers and writers. And they couldn't have been more different. Spinelli being espoused to all things existential and having trouble with the concept of there being anything 'unconscious' and Samuels a long time student and practitioner of all things Jungian, including the 'political', which of course Jung himself did not shy away from. It was an inspired mix put together by AHPB and regulated, and largely brought together, by no less an alumni of the current scene, John Rowan.

While I have seen and read Samuels in the past, indeed I have invited him to such events put on by AHPB in the past myself, I had not come across Spinelli before, other than as a name. It was therefore with some excitement that I rolled up at 9.15am yesterday. The excitement faltered when I found 120 chairs laid out in the hall, ready and waiting for 40 people to arrive. I had set off from Dorset at 6.00am to get to London and was frustrated that the catering side of The Resource Centre, who knew we were to be 40, had not managed to convey this fact to those in charge of the room's layout. The first job, then, was to remove and stack 80 chairs which I and a few others did. There is nothing worse than an auditorium announcing it is only one third full. Andrew Samuels soon arrived and suggested the remaining chairs be made into more of an inclusive 'semi circle' rather than the 'theatre' style they had been left in. This accomplished it was not long before the day began in earnest.

Samuels spoke about his anger at being driven into being part of a group, any group, be it as a member of a political party or religious group, as a man, as a psychotherapist, as an analyst, as a this or a that; that he was fed up not being able to be seen as an individual. And yet as soon as he had said this he acknowledged the nigh on impossibility of being an individual as, when a bohemian proffers him or herself up to be 'different' (I am grossly generalizing his various points here) it is not long before they find they have followers of their personalised creed thus negating any individuality.

Samuels invited the audience to throw out names of significant individuals and so Mandela, Gandhi and such like unsurprisingly were mentioned. What struck me, but which was not mentioned during this exercise, was the major problem of magnetism; that as soon as an individual showed his or her head above the parapet, a thousand

iron filings in the shape of 'followers' or 'fans' swamped the individual to the point that their 'individuality' was drowned. I believe this was Samuels' point which he allowed us to make for ourselves without labouring it: that it is impossible to remain an individual once you express what you see to be your individuality. As a result of this thought and his invitation for feedback I offered some 'self disclosure' inasmuch as it was no accident that I was sitting on the end of the row in the hall, that I always sat on an aisle seat in the cinema, that I lived on the edge of a town (and had always preferred to), in an end of terrace house; in short that I liked living 'on the edge' as my way of attempting to hang on to some measure of the sense of being an un-swamped, un-drowned 'individual'. Of course Samuels rightly pointed out that I could not escape the fact that there are droves of people like me who like to 'live on the edge' in whatever guise you may like to take the phrase.

After the coffee break mid morning Samuels gave us an exercise which, while powerful, did not add to my understanding of the paradox referred to above. We were invited to stand by a subject matter written down on a piece of paper such as 'ecology' or 'parents', or 'war' or 'family' or 'spirituality' or 'sexual orientation' or 'art and literature' etc etc . Once standing by one's chosen subject we were to mime, not express verbally, to those others in the same camp why we were attracted there. Samuels had stressed, significantly, that one should think about today, this very moment, when choosing where to stand. While this was a powerful and in many ways a moving exercise, it did not extend my understanding or quell my frustration with regard the difficulty, I should say the impossibility, of being an individual.

Ernesto Spinelli's presentation was different. A leading voice and spokesperson for the Existentialist movement, which he readily admitted had not won its arguments despite 100 years of trying, he spoke with astonishing ease about complex structures and thought processes.

His main premise which he cunningly brought back at the end of his talk to hit his 'Humanistic' audience with, was that in being a human being we in the West seem to be largely stuck in seeing and being a human being in 'substance'; that in being a human being in substance we inevitably allow and see things in an orderly way and that through this prism we find security and certainty. Once he had ground us into understanding this quite challenging concept he whipped back the blank page of an accompanying flip chart to show beneath it the concept's alter ego: the human being as 'process'. 'Here be found monsters' could précis what he listed on this flip chart. An even shorter précis could just offer the word 'chaos'. While on the substance

flip chart we had 'meaning', on the process flip chart we had 'meaninglessness'. While on the substance chart we had 'order' on the process chart we had 'chaos'.

Now once Spinelli felt he had his audience's understanding of these concepts (and it took him a good hour and a half, without an interruption from his audience, to pummel his point across, for which I can only stand and salute him for his self-sustainability) he pointed out that we cannot healthily exist in one of these concepts alone, we had to live in and with both if we were to exist in a manner approaching 'whole' or 'holistic' (my word, not one used by Spinelli).

Towards the end of this tour de force talk Spinelli challenged his audience by saying that Humanistic Psychology and Psychotherapy had 'blown it'. He asserted that we as practitioners of this particular school of psychology and psychotherapy had stayed firmly rooted in the 'substance' side of being and not encompassed the 'process'. He then twisted the knife of his challenge by suggesting that there was a group of therapists who **had** embraced the 'process' formula to an extent. He suggested that this group was the CBT lot (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), so favoured by the Government.

Now this was a bridge too far for this particular member of his audience and so, when it was appropriate and he had invited some feedback, I responded to the challenge. I suggested that over 20 years as a therapist I had often found myself saying to my clients that it is sometimes necessary to 'sit with our shit', and that in doing so was I not practising from both the 'orderly' **substance** side of being and, at the same time, from the 'chaotic' **process** side also, at one and the same time, the very thing he was accusing us of not doing? Spinelli's answer floored me at the time of it. He very gently, politely and in such a way as not to make me defensive in the slightest said to me: 'But who are you?' He went to great pains before he said this to explain that he would expect me to say the same thing back to him had it been he who had asked the question of me. What I would like to have replied in answer to 'who are you' is that I was a voice in representation of a loose collective view on how best to facilitate growth and or healing in our clients. My mind is not such a quick one as to have come up with that answer at the time so I have to be satisfied that I have at least answered him here although, in reply to this riposte, I suspect his answer might be, once again, 'Yes, but who are you?' A question we can all go away and mull over, ad infinitum.

Julian Nangle