The Coaching Relationship – Putting People First, edited by Stephen Palmer and Almuth McDowall. Routledge (2010), pp. 264.

Reviewed by Trevor Cousins.

Recent research has shown what all coaches instinctively know, that the rapport between coach and client is crucially important to successful coaching outcomes.

So, it was with some anticipation that I picked up my copy of *The Coaching Relationship*. The editors and contributors are among the most experienced and influential coaches in the country and I looked forward to accessing their experience and wisdom.

However, on scanning and then reading the book in greater depth it became clear that for a busy pragmatist learner like me, the whole is less than the sum of the parts.

The methodology for the book is sound. It covers a range of relevant topics including: interpersonal perspectives; feedback, feeding forward and setting goals; coaching across cultures; and the issue of power in the coaching relationship. Many of the chapters include dialogues and vignettes and all conclude with reflective questions and copious references.

The Preface states that the book is aimed at informing professional practice and encouraging practitioners to reflect more deeply about what we know, what we don't know, and what we need to find out about the coach-coachee relationship.

This review is, of course, very personal to me and I am writing from the perspective of what engages me. As a practitioner with less time to read about coaching than I would like, I was hoping for a practical, easily accessible piece with clear hints, tips and challenges. I wanted to gain new insights about the coaching relationship that would enable me to establish, explore and deepen my relationship with my clients, and give me clear models and theories to draw on.

I found the book to be more academic, however, than practical. Rather than speaking directly to me, the tone of the book is of people talking about coaching in front of me and with me listening in. It is objective, distanced and rational but failed to excite or engage me in the subject at hand.

While there are undoubtedly really valuable contributions in the book, the academic, discursive style makes spotting the most relevant, impactful ideas quite a challenge.

As I was reading, I also wondered who the book is aimed at. Some chapters have the feel of one academic writing for another, and are written in highly theoretical terms. Other chapters are significantly more practical and straight-forward in tone, and cover issues such as effective listening and questioning skills, with which all trained practitioners would be familiar.

In conclusion, I would say that this book is aimed at the academically-minded coach but does not really meet the needs of the busy practitioner looking for accessibility, practicality of information, and simple but memorable models that can be easily integrated and practiced.

The book is extensively researched and evidence-based, but seems to focus on views that have already been published rather than drawing learning from the contributors themselves. I personally would have gained more if the contributors had come together, applied their considerable client-based experience to the issues, and then drawn practical conclusions that I could easily understand and implement. While this may not be what the book is aiming to achieve, I feel that this would be more suited to the needs and interests of the majority of coaches.

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Constructivist Psychotherapy, Robert A. Neimeyer (Routledge, 2009), pp. 150

Reviewed by Neill Thew.

According to the creation story in Genesis, God spoke the world into being and the story of the world preceded its material existence. Such an idea might well appear a million miles away from post-modern thinking, with its characteristic rejection of the 'grand narratives' of (primarily Western) tradition, but it seems that what goes around comes around, because Neimeyer's timely book, which traces the post-modern origins of constructivist psychotherapy (CPT), also puts the client's stories and words firmly at the origin of their own worlds. Or, to put it in the words of some graffiti I saw in a back-packer's hostel deep in the Laos countryside while I was reading this book: *You make your own reality, dude.*

Constructivist Psychotherapy is a recent addition to the *CBT Distinctive Features* series, edited by Windy Dryden. One of the greatest strengths of this series as a whole is

that it opens up the rich diversity of CBT-inflected psychotherapeutic approaches to non-specialist readers, and this is doing valuable service to counter some of the grossly over-simplified discussions of recent years that have positioned CBT and Humanistic psychotherapies as in direct and inevitable opposition to one another.

The book has a useful structure: Neimeyer is given thirty chapters in which to set out the most distinctive features of constructivist psychotherapy. The book has a very practical focus, and is amply provided with illustrative case studies and clinical vignettes, which I found illuminating. The first nine chapters deal - with a light touch - with the distinctive theoretical features of CPT; the rest with practical ones. The opening, theoretical chapters were a little too brief for my taste, and skated past some of the potentially interesting epistemological discussions about how we come to construct our narratives and and our sense of knowing in dialogical concert, but I suspect that many readers will be impatient to get on to the more practical issues, and there are a number of useful suggestions for further reading if you want to explore the theoretical roots of CPT more deeply.

It was interesting to see that Neimeyer acknowledges the roots of CPT in humanistic, systemic and feminist therapeutic traditions as well as postmodern ones. He sees the essential intellectual characteristics of CPT as having to do with the primacy of personal meaning; the construction of identity within a social field; and the revision of life narratives that are incoherent, no longer helpful or restrictive. These characteristics lead to therapeutic approaches that tend to be more collaborative than authoritative; more developmental than symptom-oriented; more process-driven than content-driven; and more reflective than psychoeducational or normatively curative. The links with humanistic practice are evident.

Neimeyer has a particular skill at presenting models with a clarity that comes from a deep combination of both practical and theoretical understanding. I particularly benefited from the discussions of an 'epigenetic systems' model (Chapter 7), which is a structural way of understanding a number of embedded and interrelated systems together; from the account of using 'laddering' to surface a client's core concerns and typical narrative structures (Chapter 10); and from the discussion on 'befriending the resistance' in Chapter 23 - with a linked section on 'articulating the pro-symptom position' two chapters later. One of my own deepest reservations about some work in CBT is that it seems to me to devalue the importance of the symptom, and to ignore its importance as a mechanism for coping. By wresting the symptom away from the client, as it were, before they have been able to construct something more creative and enabling in its place, great damage can potentially be done - and, indeed, to my absolute dismay I have witnessed this first hand as the result of a naively understood CBT approach crudely applied.

As an educator, my work is greatly influenced by constructivist and social-constructivist educational thought, and I had several moments of useful insight into my own pedagogical practices whilst reading this book. It is written with an elegant deftness of touch which makes reading it a pleasure, especially where the book's own narrative is driven forward by clinical examples from Nimeyer's own practice. I would say this is an excellent introduction to CPT, and I would recommend it to any therapist wanting to explore how client stories shape their self-understanding. There are even some exercises that the reader can explore for themselves. It's probably not the text for someone with more experience in the field - but, then, it never sets out to be so.

However, what I most appreciated about the book was that it provided me with an effective scaffold for my own thinking and reflection. I found reading this a good opportunity to think again about the stories I tell myself about myself and about my world; to meditate on their structure as well as their content; and to see which narrative threads it is timely for me to cut away. I find that psychotherapy books are often too intrusive to allow space for such personal and developmental thought - provoking instead a purely intellectual response - and for me the sense of readerly space afforded by Robert Neimeyer is what has ultimately earned this book a place on my bookshelves.

The View Through the Medicine Wheel: Shamanic Maps of how the Universe Works, by Leo Rutherford. O Books (2008), pp. 216

Reviewed by Neill Thew

Back in the Summer 2009 issue of *Self and Society*, Leo Rutherford wrote a fascinating introduction to therapeutic work within the Native American Shamanic tradition.

His article left me intrigued and wanting to read more, so I turned to his excellent book-length coverage in *View Through the Medicine Wheel.* I have found this a stimulating and highly thought-provoking read – and one that has had a powerful effect on me. I love the fact that, like the practicing Shaman, this book has its feet equally firmly planted in two worlds. This is a work that deals straightforwardly and unapologetically with the world of the Spirit – without falling into the cloying preciousness of many 'New Age' texts – and yet also fully lives in the flesh and blood world of the physical.

The tone of this book is one of warmth, wit and 'take no prisoners with your bullshit'! I laughed out loud in chagrined recognition of some of my own ego games, because something about Leo's tone – a kind of a twinkle in the eye that has translated itself onto the page – made it both possible and safe for me to see myself reflected in the mirrors that were being held up for me.

In the Native American traditions within which Leo works, medicine is simply anything that does you good, and that tends towards healing through generating personal power and understanding. The specific medicine we are offered here is that of the Medicine Wheel, described and defined as 'a circle of power and knowledge, a way of understanding life … [and] our connection to all things'.

The greatest surprise to me was the creative flexibility of the wheel. Just like a turning circle, indeed, the image of the wheel returns throughout the book, but in a myriad different guises for different learning and healing purposes. The second section of the book introduces several potent wheels, including: The Star Maiden's Circle, which looks at our different life processes and their relationships and entanglements; The Dance of Foxes, which looks into the shadows of our small-e egoic self; and The Dance of Coyotes, which is the circle of our most deeply alive, authentic Self.

Just last night, I was teaching a group of trainee teachers, and our talk turned to the ways we look after ourselves and recharge our professional batteries. A couple of my students talked about different meditative practices they used. Another student, clearly getting impatient with all this apparent fluffy nonsense, suddenly exploded with 'I still don't get why anyone would want to meditate! What's the point of it?' It turned out that his frustration was connected to his inability to understand – or imagine – what meditation might be about. It's a frustration I've experienced time and again: that of wanting to understand something before I've experienced it. And, of course, that is oftentimes impossible. The only way to understanding is to let go, to risk, to open up to the not knowing and to the possibilities of a new, as yet unknown, experience. And I think that's a good approach to this book. It's fascinating to read, but to really gain understanding and experience from it, you need to dance at least some of the circles for yourself.

To this end, I think that the amount of information and guidance in this book has been very well judged. I have spent several mind-opening hours working my own way round some of the circles Leo describes – and I have found this process hugely worthwhile. There was enough in the book for me to have a sense of how to progress; but not so much that my own process was over-determined or constrained by thinking that there were particular 'rules' I had to follow, or that there was a single, 'right' way to work.

In all, the combination of a passionately felt, and dynamically written, introduction to the world view of the Shaman, with a number of practical exercises for the reader to work through, makes this the best introduction to Shamanic healing I have found. There is enough directness here to make it a book that reads well on first encounter; and enough richness that makes it worth returning to several times over.

Neill Thew is reviews editor of Self and Society, and is a freelance educator and developer.