

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

Dear Editors

If I may I would like to send this letter, through the pages of *Self & Society*, to the members of AHP. An explanation of recent events seems called for.

When AHP started back in the late 1960s and Vivian Milroy was seeking to create *Self & Society*, having been inspired by a group of people in Esalen, California, to pursue new ways of looking at life, I believe their purpose was to make solid and tangible, something that had happened in society during the 1960s; namely, its freeing up, its loosening, of the constraints society had lived within for many a decade before. Society had become less formal and more 'individual' friendly. Elvis in the fifties, The Beatles and all the rest in the sixties and now, at the start of the seventies, the youth culture couldn't be stopped; an alternative society had been born, and needed to be reflected psychologically as well as in the bedroom.

A leading light of the core group back then in 1973 when *Self & Society* was born, and a leading light of the current leadership of AHP, John Rowan, was in the forefront of the poetry vanguard at that time, 'loosening up' how we looked upon life, by being an active member of a poetry group called The Writers' Forum, generally accepted to have been led by the 'concrete' poet, Bob Cobbing. Other poets also, outside The Writers' Forum, such as Brian Patten, Adrian Henri and Roger McGough had put into words how it felt to be alive at the time:

Let me die a young man's death
not a clean and in between
the sheets holywater death
not a famous-last-words
peaceful out of breath death...

– as McGough wrote in 1967.

It is my contention that, today, AHP has lost some of this spirit, has lost its way in the maze and tangled web of the cerebral (as opposed to living and being more in the experiential) expounding this, navel gazing at that, backed up by references to thinkers and earlier expounders and theorists who have preceded the current crop.

I entirely accept that AHP has two strands to it: the 'academic' strand and the 'people' strand. When AHP is working (for me), these two strands are complementary. Sadly, I feel, this balance has been lost over the past couple of years, and while I accept *Self & Society* has its own unique style, and should indeed be a mouthpiece for Humanistic Psychology theory, behaviour and practice, I feel AHP as a whole, and the current Board in particular, is overlooking the sister purpose AHP and *Self & Society* were set up to promote in the first place, namely the unconditional acceptance, tolerance and love of our fellow human beings.

It is promoting these values through articles and learned papers, but where is it doing so on the ground? I feel that through all the cerebral, academic activity, we have lost sight of that initial spark so wonderfully captured and nurtured by Vivian Milroy when he set out to create a journal for the likes of me; an ordinary bloke with what he likes to think is a kind and tolerant heart and a mind that seems to like enquiring about the meaning of life. There must be billions of us.

Vivian Milroy wrote, in a retrospective piece published in *Self & Society* in March, 1994: 'Gradually I got to know a few scattered groups, and people who were offering workshops and lectures. I attended groups. I listened to talks.' And because of this, he sought to create the magazine to record what was going on in the world of Humanistic Psychology.

It is something of a paradox for me now to go on to say that, actually, I like *Self & Society* being as it is and has been. It certainly lends weight to our association to have a journal so full of thoughtful theory. Under recent editorship it has introduced some innovations that have given balance to heart and mind. So, despite much I have said above, my main gripe is not with *Self & Society* at all, it is with the direction AHP seems to be drifting in as a whole.

When I, Maxine Linnell, Tyagi and others regenerated AHP with its first conference in nine years back in 2007, held at Green & Away in Worcestershire, I felt as if we had breathed life back into a dying carcass. The conference, or festival as we came to call it, made the association close to £4,000 but, as important as it was that we made money from the festival, more important still was the fact that nearly 100 members of AHP, and some interested non-members (soon to become members), joined together for three days **to live the life humanistic**.

This is what is so important and, it seems to me, is missing in the current direction AHP is taking, despite the fact that plans are beginning to emerge for a 2013 conference. But we had no conference in 2011, and will have none in 2012. Why? I shall tell you why – because I lost the heart and energy to push for it. If I had not withdrawn my willingness to put on a conference in 2012 we would have had one. Green & Away was booked, many workshop leaders were booked, it could have happened. But something else happened; a sense of support for the way I do things as Administrator began to dissipate. This is the only way I can describe what the experience of working for the Board over the past 18 months has felt like.

It is very probably not the Board's fault – occasionally a Board member would ring me up to ask me what I needed, to help me in my work. I didn't need anything other than to be trusted. If I needed something, I knew how to ask for it. What I did not know was how to sustain a level of trust in me that I could do the job I was tasked to do. What I actually felt whenever someone rang me up saying 'How can we help you?' or 'What do you need?' was a greater sense of control than I had felt before, and this just didn't suit my personality.

Of course to even the odds it should be said that I am not a natural administrator. I am probably far too open for some tastes, but in being so, most people know where I am coming from. But expectations of me were clearly not met in some quarters, and I began to feel the fall-out quite quickly. It was due to this, and a clash of styles, that led me to withdraw from anchoring a festival for 2012, and as soon as I had done so the festival for 2012 was cancelled.

The 2013 conference sounds as though it is going to be high tech – there will be a 'virtual' element to it which, actually, worries me because, for me, the important aspect, the truly valuable part AHP can offer in holding a conference or festival is that we are in the same space and time, together; not communicating through a radio wave or beams off a satellite. God knows there's enough of that going on outside AHP.

The Board, entirely reasonably, will expect me to facilitate this conference in whatever ways they ask me to. If it were my first year in post I am sure I would step up to the plate but I am, as I said in one email to the Board some time ago, war-weary. I am tired of defending my corner, my style, my way of being, and consequently I have decided to resign as Administrator, as from June 2012.

There are so many places in the world – at times in my deepest despair I feel it is in every nook and cranny of the world – that people seem incapable of tolerating, much less respecting, their fellow human beings. AHP has an almost unique opportunity to stand against this darkness as a candle might light the night. Think of Amnesty's logo – it is immediate, poignant and powerful.

My hopes for AHP continue to be that it is an active, bright and inspirational beacon amidst the dark and negative mass that seems to make up so much of the world. My hopes for AHP are that it is not merely seen as the publisher of a magazine, albeit a good one. (This is something I fear huge swathes of our membership see it as.) My hopes for AHP are that it will finally, finally, come up with a way of showing the world what it stands for in no more than a single, short, paragraph.

My hopes for AHP are that in the future it stands for love, tolerance and understanding (what could be more humanistic?) and celebrates it not just with articles about different takes on various therapies, good and important though these are for the promulgation of all things humanistic, but that in addition it will, wherever and whenever it can, facilitate meetings and gatherings, both in small groups and as a larger community. Surely this is the only way for us all as individuals, and for AHP as an 'association', to survive.

I very much regret having to resign. I have thought long and hard about it – for well over six months – but I think it is the only way forward for me if I am not to become embittered, angry and negative – everything I abhor in life.

I have written a letter of resignation to the Board, separately. This is not my letter of resignation, rather a letter to you, the members, some of whom I have come to know well through our interactions. I shall miss you. I just thought everyone remotely interested in AHP, not just the Board, should know the real reasoning behind my going.

Julian Nangle, March 2012

AN OPEN LETTER TO JULIAN NANGLE – From John Rowan

First of all, may I say how much I like you. You come across to me as a warm human being, with a lot of interest and caring for the AHP and the people in it. This also comes through in your letter to *Self & Society*. When I talk with you, it is a pleasure.

But I also find you too one-sided. You speak of the academic strand as opposed to the people strand. You also refer to the cerebral as opposed to the spirit. I don't think this does justice to anything much. When I wrote the third edition of *Ordinary Ecstasy*, the book in which I try to outline what Humanistic Psychology is and does, I realised that the game had changed. It was no longer good enough to utter the good news that we were all human beings with decent values. We had to start thinking in a much more sophisticated way, which included some of the opposites instead of excluding them. I recast the whole thing in terms of what we now call Second Tier thinking, which includes opposites and thrives on paradox. So the subtitle changed to 'the dialectics of humanistic psychology'.

This is all so unfamiliar that I think it is worthwhile to spell out some of what this means. A man named Clare Graves did some fascinating research on levels of consciousness which was taken

up and publicised by Don Beck and Chris Cowan, and then turned into a public offering called Spiral Dynamics, which has now been used by many organisations. It is similar in many ways to the description of levels of consciousness laid down by Maslow some years before. What he called 'Self-Actualisation', they called 'Yellow', because they used colours instead of descriptive labels in order to reduce prejudice. But as with self-actualisation, what they meant was a state of consciousness which was not phased by paradox, but could embrace it wholeheartedly. Ken Wilber wrote an attractive book about all this, which he called *A Brief History of Everything*, and the ridiculous title speaks well to the contradictions within all this.

In this respect, Yellow, or the self-actualised level of consciousness, was ahead of Green, the next level down, which was described in this way by Beck and Cowan: 'People work in order to have more human contact, learn about others and come to know their inner being more fully. People feel that being liked and accepted is more important than economic rewards, competitive advantage, material gain, or supporting rules from outside the group. People value peer approval and consensus in a climate of openness, trust, and sharing, but fear rejection and disapproval. (p. 132) So this is a good state of mind, and a real advance on what went before, but one-sided.

The movement from Green to Yellow is described by Graves as 'a momentous leap'. At this level, we: 'Accept the inevitability of nature's flows and forms. Focus on functionality, competence, flexibility and spontaneity. Find natural mix of conflicting "truths" and "uncertainties". Discovering personal freedom without harm to others or excesses of self-interest. Experience fullness of living on an Earth of such diversity in multiple dimensions. Demand integrative and open systems.' (p. 275) And with this we have shifted into a realm of thought described by researchers in these ways: by Kohlberg as 'True personal conscience', by Loevinger as 'Flexible and creative', by Cook-Greuter as 'Autonomous', by Torbert as the 'Strategist', by Riegel as 'Beyond formal logic', and by Wilber as 'Bodymind integration'. We find this state of mind pretty regularly in humanistic writings.

Wilber actually wrote up the whole Spiral Dynamics gamut in his ebullient novel *Boomeritis*, where he writes: 'No matter what level of mental development you are at, when you learn the spiral of development – when you mentally study the entire spectrum of consciousness – *you are using yellow cognition*. We say that you "light up yellow". So by studying the full Spiral, you are engaging second-tier thinking in yourself' (p. 413) What I am saying is that it is only by moving to second-tier thinking that we can overcome the limitations of Green attitudes. It seems that you do not want to rise to the challenge of moving beyond Green, and this is quite a legitimate choice on your part. It is just a pity, from my point of view, because I would have liked to go on working with you on this.

I guess that you do not take easily to thinking about thinking, in this sort of way. If that be true, it seems to me a shame, because it means that you are no longer in flux, no longer open to new ideas – more attached to what used to be new back then. If this seems too confrontative, I apologise for my lack of finesse. I still hope to see you often in the future.

All best wishes
John
April 2012