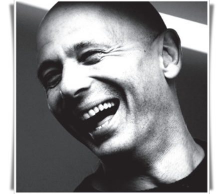
Book Reviews



Edited by **Manu Bazzano**, Book Reviews Editor

Slow-motion Dreaming

Dreams and the Person-Centred Approach: Cherishing Client Experiencing

By: Andrea Koch
PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, 2012, 135 pp
ISBN: 978-1-906254-47-6
Price: £13.99
Reviewed by: Beatrice Millar, Person-Centred Counsellor

As Andrea Koch observes, little has been written about dreams and the person-centred approach. As a person-centred therapist who has worked on my own dreams with my body psychotherapist for years, I was delighted at the publication of this book.

My way of working with dreams is to value dreams equally with every other expression of the client: this is implicit in the basic philosophy of the classical, non-directive, person-centred approach in which the therapist does not decide what is and what is not important. The actualising tendency, given the optimal conditions, can be trusted to bring into awareness what is most beneficial to the organism at any particular time. I also value and am very receptive to dreams, and find that clients do often share dreams in their sessions with me.

One of the new thoughts I've had, prompted by the reading of this book, is that perhaps, as Andrea suggests, dreams need 'affirmative action' in person-centred therapy, training and supervision, as they have been so far overlooked in person-centred thinking. Andrea suggests several possible reasons for this, the most significant of which is that dreams are traditionally associated with the unconscious, with Freud and Jung and interpretation. All of this Carl Rogers famously rejected in developing his new theories based on trusting the client's experiencing and attending to what is in awareness and on the edge of awareness, rather than the unconscious. For many person-centred therapists the notion of the unconscious is a dubious and frequently obscuring concept, but as Andrea points out, at the point that someone is sharing a dream, it is no longer unconscious anyway.

The first two chapters set the context. The first looks briefly at the fundamentals of person-centred theory and practice, and how dreams can be incorporated into this. She draws on the writings of other person-centred theorists to support her hypothesis that dreams are a pure expression of the actualising tendency, the movement towards maintenance and enhancement of the whole organism. The second chapter, looking at *dreamsensing* (the term Andrea prefers to 'working with dreams') as a creative endeavour, was one of the most stimulating, though I found here, as at several places, that ideas could have been developed more fully.

What the book does present fully is the description of the author's sessions with three practitioners working in different ways on her dreams, which takes up about half of the book. I appreciated her generosity in sharing her own dreams and giving us transcripts of each of these sessions, which offer invaluable learning and insights as to how and why interventions are made. She presents the work as person-centred, in spite of her many directive questions and the explicit guidance, things that might raise a few eyebrows in purist quarters. After each

transcript there is a short 'client's summary' describing and evaluating the session, and then two further chapters looking at the differences between the ways of working, both from the client's and therapist's perspective.

The author sees the differentiation between the sessions as depending on where her attention is focused – on the spectrum of awareness, meta-awareness and conceptual linking – which in turn seems to determine the pace of the session, with the third session being the fastest moving, as well as the longest, and even incorporating an 'action' stage. Personally I sensed a demarcation between a 'dream session' like the sessions she presents here, and working with dreams or 'dreamsensing' as part of an ongoing therapeutic relationship. Looking at 'action' in relation to a dream seems unnecessary, as I would expect the dreams to be weaving their gifts in and out of the therapy sessions – I would not be looking to pin down what they mean or what needs to be done, although I can see that as a dream session in itself, looking at action might feel helpful to a client wanting to reap the fruits of a particular dream.

The middle session with Barbara MacGavin, described as 'Focusing and dreamsensing', seemed to me to be the one that honoured and allowed to deepen most fully the dream images and sensations. What I valued about this work was the space and openness around whatever the author shared, allowing the fertile ambiguity and many and changing meanings of the dream and dream sharing to emerge in their own time.

As Andrea says, 'how the dreaming process is conceptualised has a definite impact on how we approach the dream narration' (p. 14), and she suggests that 'dreaming might be conceived as a process of multi-dimensional, fast-motion Focusing, or Focusing as a process of slow-motion dreaming'.

This book has provoked, stimulated and moved me more that I realised at first. It is very accessible; there are helpful summaries of the main points in the theoretical chapters, useful yet brief appendices for those who are not familiar with person-centred or Focusing theory, indications of further reading and web-sites.

I was touched by the author's openness and personal, revealing style, both in sharing the content of her dreams and the process of writing the book – the two pleasingly linked. I would recommend this to anyone interested in working with dreams, as her ways of working are broadly humanistic rather than specifically person-centred. Yet person-centred counsellors will benefit from the contribution dreams can offer to the therapeutic process, and by situating their place in person-centred work. S

Into the Wild

Vital Signs: Psychological Responses to Ecological Crisis

Edited by: Mary-Jayne Rust & Nick Totton
Published by: Karnac Books, London, 2012, 336 pp
ISBN: 978-1780490489
Price: £24.99
Reviewed by: Caroline Brazier, Leader of the Tariki Training Programme in Other-Centred Psychotherapy, www.buddhistpsychology.info

Ecological crisis brings into question our very nature as animals and as humans, and throws into the spotlight the search for the meaning of life itself. In such circumstances, psychotherapists, as facilitators of the exploration of personal meaning, seem bound to reflect upon the environmental context in which they, and their clients, operate. The increasing interest which some therapists are showing in environmentally based therapies is therefore welcome. A growing movement of practitioners, who take the situation seriously enough that they can no longer divorce their conversations with individuals from the larger context of environmental change, is reflected in the recent publication of a collection of papers under the editorship of Mary-Jayne Rust and Nick Totton.

Vital Signs is a collection of responses from a variety of perspectives. It reflects the breadth of the eco-psychology and environmental therapies community. Among its contributors are writers and practitioners from a variety of related fields, including psychotherapists, academics, educators and those involved in practical activism. The book aims to represent the emerging British voice in the movement, but includes among its 20 chapters some papers which reflect work from the United States and mainland Europe. Whilst some chapters are written by people well known in the field, others come from relative newcomers and bring a taste of grass-roots work and viewpoints.

Many of the chapters take their lead from the deep ecology movement, which grew out of the work of Arne Naess in the 1970s. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 18, both written by Margaret Kerr and David Key, the writers draw strongly on his theory as a basis for their understanding of the unconscious process as it emerges in the Natural

Change Project and other wilderness work which they conduct in the Scottish highlands. Naess is also referred to by both Rust and Totton in their respective chapters, and the deep ecology movement of Naess and Macy is cited and clearly influential on many other writers in the book. The deep ecology movement tends to view the way forward in terms of a reconnection with the natural and the wild through a spiritual expansion of the sense of self. According to such models, the way out of environmental crisis is through identification with the planet itself and a sense of interconnection with the bio-system as a whole. Another metaphor which is used to describe the planetary problems is that of sickness, and in Chapter 3, 'Gaia with AIDS', Peter Chatalos combines James Lovelock's Gaia theory with ideas drawn from Naess, suggesting that the reason why humans are failing to respond to the crisis as a part of a planetary self-healing system is because of this lack of identification with the whole. Human psychology differentiates and separates us from the rest of nature.

Many of the writers in the book explore the philosophical basis of potential change. In addition to Chatalos, a number of the writers see humans as being at the root of the ecological problem, and advocate solutions which involve some sort of return to our wild, embodied nature, as for example Viola Samson in Chapter 1. Such ideas of the wild are also found in chapters by Totton, Rust and Bradshaw.

Such perspectives often refer back to the Buddhist teaching of Interdependent Co-arising. Such is the influence of Macy and others in the deep ecology movement that ideas of inter-connection and inter-being predominate in the thinking of many environmental theorists. It is regretful, however, that theorists in this book have not drawn on the earlier Buddhist teaching of Dependant Origination, which emphasises humans' dependant nature rather than our inter-dependence. As James Lovelock suggests in his Gaia hypothesis, the planet will survive without humans, albeit in an afflicted form, but humans will not survive without the planet.

By contrast to ideas of a return to the natural, Paul Maitney's Chapter 4, 'Longing to be human', provides a refreshing move away from the glorification of the wild, or return to Eden, pointing out that it is our animal instincts for consumption and greed which are at the root of environmental problems. In contrast to the popular ideas of connection to our animal nature, Maitney sees the human capacity for thought and spiritual insight as the source of any possible salvation for the planet, and thus roots a possible future in our evolutionary capacity. In place of inter-dependence he advocates differentiation, and supports the view that spiritual and religious values have always had an important place in the regulation of human society and the overcoming of instincts such as greed. Whether or not one agrees with this position, which stands out against the predominating culture of the book, this chapter is particularly stimulating and well argued.

Consumerism and the emphasis on individualism understandably raise questions in a number of chapters. Many of these discussions are theoretical, but Rosemary Randall, in Chapter 17, addresses these themes in practical ways by discussing how groups set up in Cambridge under the Carbon Conversations project challenged people to reduce their carbon footprint. Another practical example of environmentally based work is Chapter 8 by Inger Birkeland and Astri Aasen, which beautifully describes their work with school children.

In a book on the relationship between psychotherapy and the environment, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most exciting chapters is that of Nick Totton, who offers an analysis of therapeutic methodology based on his reflections on wildness. In this chapter Totton rejects the prevalent culture of outcome-orientated therapy and proposes a non-interventive, meaning-making process. He proposes a model which, rather than regarding therapist and client as an isolated dyad, sees them as engaged in a shared process which is part of the greater system of human and non-human phenomena, and as such holds and works with aspects of the greater whole. The therapeutic relationship is itself an eco-system and is embedded within a greater eco-system. Totton's chapter proposes a reconsideration of many therapeutic expectations in favour of a co-creative process of shared encounter and unfolding exploration. Such proposals critique the current therapy paradigm and hold an enriching and refreshing counter-position.

The final chapter of the book picks up this theme of the voice from the margins. Chris Robertson draws on Jerome Bernstein's concept of borderland consciousness, which expresses itself through a special intimacy with the natural, the animal and the wild. Robertson explores ways in which the outsider and the marginal person may provide insight into the missing aspect of a situation. Echoing Totton's questioning of the value of hard boundaries, he proposes that it is especially in these undefined areas, at the margins of social groupings, that borderland consciousness emerges, bringing new perspectives which have the potential to bridge the spaces between human society

and the wider, stricken planet.

If the book gives hint of ways forward, these probably come in the discussions of the role of the boundary and the consequent critique of modern notions of self-hood, independence and therapeutic purpose. These discussions informed by, but not beholden to, the ecological debate seem live and vigorous, and have the potential to revive some of the creative energy lost from the profession in recent decades. Whether this will improve our relationship with our planet we have yet to see, but one hopes it may.

Acquire and Debase

The Turin Horse (A Torinoi Lo)

A film by: Béla Tarr
Artificial Eye, September 2012, 143 minutes
DVD: 0-7815-1403-7
Price: £11.99
Reviewed by: Manu Bazzano

On 3 January 1889 in Turin, Italy, Friedrich Nietzsche stepped out of the doorway of number six, Via Carlo Alberto. Not far from him, a cab driver was having trouble with a stubborn horse. The horse refused to move; the driver lost his patience and took his whip to it. Nietzsche put an end to the brutal scene, throwing his arms around the horse's neck, sobbing. This was the beginning of Nietzsche's crisis – a place of no return.

The last film by the great Hungarian director Béla Tarr begins somewhere in the countryside where the driver of the cab – the viewer assumes it's him – lives with his daughter and the horse. Outside, a windstorm rages. This film is a voyage into inevitable darkness, where God is conspicuous by his absence. Nietzsche does not appear in the movie, but his presence is pervasive, diffuse – inexorable as the poignant score.

There are echoes of Sisyphus' myth in the film – the distant hill, the pointless journey there and back. We are given the bare bones of a daily existence lived at the edge of the world and at the edge of time.

Every night, before going to bed, as the oil lamp is extinguished, the daughter asks 'What is this?' – a question from the unfathomable depths, a question with no answer. A question anyone who has experienced true questioning will recognise. What is indeed this life, day after day, night after night, ending into nothingness? A true *koan* – a deep existential question. The film conveys much in two hours or so – much more than your average highfalutin' three-year Heideggerian certificate course will ever dream to remotely get across.

Visitors show up on two occasions: a group of gipsies who curse the farmer and curse the water in the well after the farmer has refused to give any. Days later the well dries up. Before setting off, an old gypsy gives a book to the farmer's daughter. She reads it with great difficulty, scanning every syllable – mysterious, unsettling visions, straight out of St John's Apocalypse or from the darker passages of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*.

Another visitor appears, asking for *palinka* (Hungarian fruit brandy). The farmer welcomes him, and while his daughter fills the traveller's bottle, the latter delivers one of the most powerful monologues in the entire history of cinema, a monologue echoing Nietzsche's more dissonant early writings. 'Why didn't you go into town?', the farmer asks. 'The wind's blown it away.' 'How come?' 'It's gone to ruin ... everything's in ruins, everything's been degraded.' So begins the traveller's monologue.

This is not some kind of cataclysm, the traveller says. On the contrary, it's about man's own judgement over his own self. Everything has been debased – why? Because everything has been acquired in a sneaky, underhand fight. Whatever they touch – and they touch everything – they've debased. The method is: 'acquire, debase; debase,

"Everything has been debased – why? Because everything has been acquired in a sneaky, underhand fight".

acquire'. It's been going on like this for centuries. They only do it in one way, like a rat attacks from ambush.

By now these winners who attack from ambush rule the earth, and there isn't a single tiny nook where one can hide something from them. Because everything they can lay their hands on is theirs. Even things we think they can't reach but they do reach are also theirs, because the sky is already theirs and all our dreams.

Theirs is the moment, nature, infinite silence. Even immortality is theirs, you understand? Everything, everything is lost for ever! And those many noble great and excellent just stood there, if I can put it that way. They stopped at this point and had to understand and had to accept that there is neither god nor gods. And the excellent, the great and the noble had to understand and accept this night from the beginning. But of course they were quite incapable of understanding it. They believed it and accepted it but they didn't understand it. They just stood there; bewildered but not resigned until something – that spark from the brain – finally enlightened them. 'And all at once they realized that there is neither god nor gods. All at once they saw that there is neither good nor bad. Then they saw and understood that if this was so, then they themselves do not exist either!'

There are echoes of *early* Nietzsche, the dismantler of certainties – up until book IV of Gay Science, before his ecstatic affirmation of becoming and the courageous declaration of *amor fati* (love of destiny). We witness the exacting gloom of de-creation before the joy of Yea-saying, before the frolicking dissemination into perspectivism. Béla Tarr's Nietzsche is the reverse of *Dostoevsky*; the latter hinted that if God is dead, then everything is permitted. What Nietzsche arrives at is: God is dead, hence nothing is permitted.

Given that Nietzsche is now graciously tolerated as a pre-existential thinker, it would bear fruit to take on board what the film subtly yet unmistakably conveys: the full impact of meaninglessness and groundlessness, the recognition that there is no freedom without a voyage into darkness, without the taste of ashes and of God's absence – not the Oxonian, well-fed, deeply conservative, ruddy-cheeked state of mind of the 'God delusion' brigade but the darkest night of despair before an unwarranted white dawn.

Immaculately photographed, the film is the final statement from a master film maker, and it is only right that it should be an artist to convey this powerful existential stance. It is an essential tonic as well as an adjunct to anyone having to learn the contemporary platitudes of *Existential Psychotherapy Inc*. ❸

Foundationless Counselling?

Post-existentialism and the Psychological Therapies: Towards a Therapy without Foundations

Edited by: Del Loewenthal
Karnac Books, London, 2011, 240 pp
ISBN: 1855758466
Price: £24.99
Reviewed by: Tom Strong

> Might... a post-existential framework open a space where we can think about... intersubjective issues of culture, power, language from a critical point of view, while attempting to retain our focus on the 'face of the Other'?
>
> Cotton and Loewenthal, in Loewenthal, 2011: 113

For some time now theorists and social scientists have been describing ours as a 'post' era. This prefix, 'post', has stirred controversies when pitted against a modern scientific ideal, that human experience was ultimately and correctly knowable. The controversies extended to psychologists' efforts to correctly know humans, and base pedagogic and therapeutic efforts on that knowing. Humanist counsellors, in particular, have grappled with postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-foundationalism, and even post-humanism. The gist of these 'post' terms is that one can no longer speak of knowledge as if it were inherently understandable, as one might in using a phrase like 'the human condition'. The suspect word in such a phrase is the definite article 'the', which conveys a singularly familiar sense of human existence. If one comes to accept the other 'post' words mentioned, then it isn't a huge leap to consider and welcome Del Loewenthal's edited volume on post-existentialist therapy in a post-foundational era.

Post-existentialism and the Psychological Therapies showcases the writing of instructors and students at the Research Centre for Therapeutic Education at the University of Roehampton in London – a Centre I visited in

November of 2009, at Loewenthal's invitation. My review of this book came from another of Del's invitations. I was intrigued by the notion of post-foundational, 'post-existentialist' therapies and had sat in on seminars while at Roehampton that linked 'post' notions of psychoanalytic, phenomenological and existential theories to research and practice. Reading this book helped to indulge my intrigue further, and was mostly a rewarding read.

Post-foundational existentialism, for Loewenthal, embraces the ethical and philosophical insights of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas's ethics begin with looking into the faces of our others; to their infinite and unpredictable otherness that is well-beyond any a *priori* knowing we could bring to such an encounter. Levinas, a Lithuanian Jew who survived Nazi incarceration, offered a simple ethical maxim: relationship precedes ontology. Ontology, on this view, is our sense of what is real, true and good that we might impose on others, regardless of intentions or reasons. Most counselling, existentialist included, begins from precisely such kinds of knowing. In the case of existentialism, the foundational ontological ideas come from phenomenologists, like Husserl (Levinas's early mentor) or Sartre, who restored a sense of human subjectivity to facing and addressing life's dilemmas. In this sense, the authors of this volume, all of whom shared co-authoring roles with Loewenthal, also describe themselves as post-phenomenologists. For the authors, collectively, post-existentialism and post-phenomenology synonymously refer to a stance on counselling without (or with flexibly and collaboratively applied) theories or existential ideas that could come between practitioners and clients. In this day and age when counsellors increasingly practise using diagnostic categories and evidence-based manuals *for* clients' experiences, Levinas's ethics can seem radically post-foundational. Loewenthal and his co-authors invite readers to consider counselling without the foundations of their models and theories. More important to this team of authors are 'epistemologies of possibility' (Loewenthal, 2011: 50) grounded in collaboratively developed practices that put clients first.

Most humanist counsellors would feel at home in this book, with one potentially large caveat: what the authors advocate is the phenomenological practice of époche (bracketing one's assumptions); and for them, that means opening oneself to the unknown possibilities posed by our encounters with clients. In effect, this means joining the phenomenological worlds of clients 'without a map' as well, and developing new vocabularies of understanding and action together.

After an opening chapter in which Loewenthal explicates 'post-existentialist' counselling (a process somewhere *between* existentialist and postmodern counselling), readers are introduced to related chapters such as one on 'post-phenomenology' – counselling that focuses on what emerges between client and counsellor. Other chapters focus on counselling clients having a diagnostic label (dementia), a re-examination of a classic existentialist client case study from Binswanger, historical accounts of participants in R.D. Laing's famous 1960s Philadelphia Association communities, a consideration of post-existentialist counselling for clients diagnosed as having schizophrenia, a post-existentialist approach to research (i.e. for the researcher or the researched?), training for counsellors in post-existentialist approaches to counselling, and the future of counselling without any models and foundational ideas. The chapters collectively present the case for counselling clients without a *priori* ideas, or by using lightly applied existential, psychodynamic and humanist ideas. For my tastes, I was fine with the chapters that generally referred to post-existential (à la Levinas) ideas and practices, but somewhat queasy with the insufficiently detailed hybrids of pre-existing ideas meant to be applied in post-existential ways. I would have liked to have read more on how one balances one's pet theories in a post-existential approach to practice.

There are interesting tensions shaping counselling as a profession these days. While on the one hand, the field has a pluralistic history in which diverse models of practice have been welcomed, on the other, efforts to secure funding and assumed scientific legitimacy have prompted many counsellors to turn to DSM diagnoses and evidence-based manuals of practice. Loewenthal and his co-authors take up an even more challenging position; one with a client-centredness that will feel welcome for most readers of this journal, but one that entails a very different sense of ethics and conversational flexibility and focus. Counselling that focuses on radically welcoming and furthering the 'otherness' of our clients involves a very different kind of sensitivity and training. With this book, Loewenthal and his colleagues at Roehampton challenge what they see as an increasingly managerialist culture in counselling based on evidence (or pre-knowing), while inviting consideration of a quite different way of engaging clients on existential concerns. S

Tom Strong, Ph.D., Educational Studies in Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary; strongt@ucalgary.ca

Just Like the Rest of Us

In Treatment – The Complete Collection (DVD box set)

Complete HBO Season 1–3, Warner Home Video, February 2012
Price: £40.97 (20 discs)
Reviewed by: Rebecca Greenslade

Adapted from the successful original Israeli version, *BeTipul, In Treatment* stars Gabriel Byrne as Paul Weston, a psychotherapist whose empathic endeavour to help others stands in stark contrast to the struggles within his own life. He is like his clients, troubled and isolated, experiencing a failing marriage and the echo of an unhappy childhood as he cared for his dying mother. It feels more like a play than a TV show, each episode taking place within the therapy room with Paul and client sitting opposite each other. Produced to run for half an hour five nights a week, the episodes resemble short and intense one act plays, often uncomfortable to watch; for through the intimate exchanges Paul shares with his clients, the viewer is invited into a place of painful resonance with their own humanity and fragility. The week ends with Paul's own therapy session on Friday where any misconceptions about the emotionally resolved and expert therapist are reduced to nothing more than façade. Yes, he's as fucked up as the rest of us.

> "The beautifully written and acted descriptions of human frailty, isolation, yearnings for intimacy and meaningfulness moved me."

Of course there is compromise with *In Treatment*. There is an element of incongruence with a series based on 30 minutes of therapeutic dialogue five nights a week with a show produced for the American viewer, whose TV experiences are largely punctuated by commercial breaks every few minutes. Paul's therapy room contains a great deal more activity than I have ever experienced, with his clients pushing boundaries with rampant, testing regularity. One brings and leaves a coffee machine into Paul's therapy room; another barges into his kitchen and sets up camp for the session. A client knocks on his door out of hours and Paul chooses to sit outside with him into the night whilst leaving his young son indoors and alone. Many get up, sit down, get up and sit down, which led me to wonder why I'd spent two and half years in therapy never leaving my chair! I would have liked the producers to have been bolder in depicting the inertia we can feel both as client and therapist, the discomfort or revelation that can emerge from long silences, the quiet challenge of compliant, non-confrontational clients. I can understand criticisms that *In Treatment* is an exaggerated caricature of psychotherapy. I have colleagues that hated it for this very reason.

However, I loved it. I loved it because despite the dramatisation, the themes in *In Treatment* remain fundamentally human and recognisable. The beautifully written and acted descriptions of human frailty, isolation, yearnings for intimacy and meaningfulness moved me. April, a student diagnosed with cancer, communicates her lymphoma to Paul through writing it on a piece of paper. It is too impossible for words. We watch her courage repeatedly falter and gain strength, as she attempts to connect to a life where death is a loud possibility. As it is for all of us. Emotions and ethics confront each other when a client commits suicide and the family think Paul should have prevented it. It is never just us and the client in the room. Walter, a beleaguered CEO, wants quick relief from his panic attacks and approaches therapy like his business, wanting a quick-fix solution so he can carry on as he

always has. I hear more and more of hurting financiers entering therapy rooms over the past couple of years. These narratives are framed poignantly by Paul, a contemporary relational psychoanalyst who is often destabilised by the tension between his desire to help his clients find understanding and meaning within their lives and his scepticism in his own efficacy and that of his profession. I appreciated the lack of complacency in Paul and the complications this brings for him. We all need to doubt.

Paul Weston's approach is in many ways a far cry from my own, and throughout all three series I found myself often squirming in discomfort at his interventions and choices. This is however why I whole-heartedly recommend it. Whether you like it or not, watching *In Treatment* is deeply affecting, and this capacity to be affected lies, in my experience, at the heart of being a psychotherapist. It is not just direct experiences with clients and colleagues that invite questions about our practice and profession. I have recently come across a small body of articles from the 1950s and 1960s written by American psychologists and psychotherapists that recommended the use of fictional literature on training courses in order to enliven, excite and develop empathy within their trainees. And so with *In Treatment*. As Irvin Yalom says, 'the truth of fictional characters moves us because it is our own truth'. Aside from this, it is also just good television.

Homo Sapiens Year 50,000

Back on the Fire: Essays by Gary Snyder

Counterpoint Press, Berkeley, Calif., 2008, 160 pp
ISBN: 1-59376-137-6
Price: £11.99
Reviewed by: James Belassie

Gary Snyder's collection of essays, *Back on the Fire*, reads like an arcane scrapbook, sharing wide-ranging slivers of insight both practical and spiritual, drawn from his rich and varied life. It draws together pieces written over the past two decades and more, loosely bound through a central ecological metaphor – *fire*, and the use in forest management of 'prescribed burns' to clear areas of dead brush.

The work expresses Snyder's radically open and visionary definition of ecology – radical because it seeks genuinely to replant the human within the natural world, deeply connected, ancient and transient; visionary and open because it sees 'ecology' as so broad a concept: namely 'a valuable shorthand term for complexity in motion'. So it is no wonder that the surface directness of Snyder's style quickly gives way to a deep and mesmerising sense of disorientation: this is a book about *complexity*.

His writing is not complex in the dense literary way often associated with humanistic or philosophical prose; instead, like in poetry, and especially the oriental and Buddhist poetry of which he is a life-long scholar, the implications of straightforward concepts open upon worlds of complexity that language could never encompass. Instead of laboriously criticising, for example, the blindness of the modern era to our truly ancient ancestral roots – our 'deep history', as revealed by cultural anthropology – Snyder eloquently reminds us that this is the 'Homo sapiens year 50,000', and leaves it at that.

He writes about the act of writing itself – the book is about his literary as much as his ecological vocation: he describes his writing as 'searching for ways to talk about the natural landscapes and old myths and stories of the whole planet'. It is also a book about humans and nature in the twenty-first century, i.e. a book about environmental devastation ('the issue of our age', yell most ecologists, no doubt with good reason). Yet if I were to choose a word to describe Snyder's writing, it would be – *quiet*. Why should a book about such urgent and frightening subject matter be so muted in tone? Partly because of an innate humility in the writer – Snyder's voice is unfailingly refreshing in its refusal to become didactic; sometimes it seems as though he is continually starting, breaking off and starting again with something new, though really just approaching the same thing from a different direction. To my ear, it gives his writing a youthful, truthful quality.

Perhaps the quietness of the book also has to do with the fact that, apart from his ecological credentials, Snyder is most consummately a poet. He speaks of his

own poetry as 'the work of seeing the world *without* any prism of language', and he adds: 'The idea of poetry of minimal surface texture, with its complexities hidden at the bottom of the pool is ancient'.

In Lonesome *Traveller*, Snyder's one-time beat poet friend Jack Kerouac writes of discovering 'lostpurity' amid the grimy polluted backstreets of mid-century 'workingman' San Francisco. 'In afternoons of sun hot meditation in my jeans with head on handkerchief on brakeman's lantern or (if not working) on books, I look up at *blue sky of perfect lostpurity* and feel the warp of wood of old America beneath me ...'.

Lostpurity is a magnificent word for summoning our melancholy fear of finding ourselves trapped in a disfigured urban world, yet glimpsing far-off mountains – but out of reach, so far beyond our reach. Is it *lostpurity* we search, the word Kerouac stumbled upon so effortlessly, because he is a poet, in Snyder's sense? Armed with a little, apt word, or phrase, the whole is effortlessly spoken: the whole tragic rage and confusion of the human soul thrust into a chaotic age – spoken truthfully if it can be spoken in an understated way – is this perhaps the Zen aesthetic: elegance, simplicity and truth?

Snyder teaches us, through the act as much as the content of his writing, that outraged rhetoric, hot-blooded confrontation and polemic will not save us from our self-made ecological travesties. Not just because violence will never be quenched by violence, but because a mental state of outrage is our rational, not our natural response to environmental destruction. Our first, natural response is no different from that of any wild animal – confusion, a wrenching sense of dislocation in the face of a power we are too naïve to comprehend (so many millions of years of evolution have not prepared us for *this*) – so the poet's true response might quite legitimately be a quiet one, indeed so plain and quiet, as Snyder himself suggests, that it 'runs the risk of invisibility'.

The poet's work gives voice to what he calls 'wild mind'. In this tame world, the risk of invisibility is inevitable, because the wild part of the human mind, like wild nature, only speaks softly and has become lost in noisy overgrowth. Hence the title of the book, *Back on the Fire*: the hope that we might still be able to clear away enough mental detritus, through small, controlled burns – meditation, say; conversation; music; little truth-channelling poems; mantras – to hear the call of our wild mind and reconnect with the deep earth. S

NICE Under Scrutiny

Scrutinising NICE: The Impact of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence Guidelines on the Provision of Counselling and Psychotherapy in Primary Care in the UK'

By: Anne Guy, Rhiannon Thomas, Sue Stephenson and Del Loewenthal, UKCP Research Unit, Research Centre for Therapeutic Education, Roehampton University, 2011, 29 pp; retrieved from: http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/hres/nice%20report.pdf (20 June 2012)

Reviewed by: Adrian Hemmings

The average consultation time for most GPs is eleven minutes and the average number of consultations they have in a week is 105 (The Information Centre, 2008). When confronted by a patient who is in emotional or psychological distress there is a well worn procedure: listen to the patient, ask about symptoms, make a diagnosis and then consult the NICE guidelines on how best to 'treat' the patient. On consulting the NICE guidelines, the almost inevitable conclusion is that the patient needs Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT has a sound research base which is backed up by the 'Gold Standard' of research methods, the Randomised Controlled Trial, or RCT. The number of sessions varies according to diagnosis (from around ten to 40). The GP is relieved and the patient treated. This is all straightforward and pragmatic, and means the patient receives the appropriate treatment and so is potentially cured. Or is it?

Anne Guy and colleagues have written a very thorough and thought-provoking critique of this whole procedure, with a particular focus on the role that NICE plays in the process. They begin by challenging the bedrock of NICE guidelines, namely the concept of diagnosis and the medicalisation of the spectrum of human distress. They compare the biomedical model with the more conversational model of psychotherapy, and conclude that transposing biological diagnostic paradigms over to psychological distress is unscientific

and untenable. They use a quotation from Mirowsky and Ross (2003: 31) which sums this up: 'A person is diseased or not. The disease is malaria or not, cholera or not....A language of categories fits some realities better than others. It fits the reality of psychological problems poorly.'

The NICE guidelines are developed by a committee of 'experts' in the field known as a Guideline Development Group, or GDG. Guy et al. go on to examine the composition of these GDGs. They conclude that there is, unsurprisingly, a dearth of psychological therapists (just 6.7 per cent) on these committees, that are overwhelmingly populated by more biomedical researchers and practitioners. This goes some way to explaining the bio-medical bias.

In the next section of the review, Guy et al. go on to question the notion held by NICE that psychological therapies are akin to a drug; that the 'intervention' is standardised and remains separate from the therapeutic relationship. The notion that a manualised intervention conducted by one therapist is the same intervention as that carried out by another has always struck me as a nonsense, and this is illustrated in this research report. They then go on to explore the concept of psychotherapy as a dialogue between two , and make comparisons between the two ways of understanding psychological therapy.

Guy et al. then turn their attention to the type of research which is used in the NICE guidelines and their reliance on the RCT. They question the usefulness of the RCT in assessing the *effectiveness* of psychological therapies as opposed to their *efficacy*. Efficacy research is that carried out in 'ideal' (and unrealistic) conditions. Here, the type of intervention is highly controlled (usually strictly adhering to a manual), as are the presenting problems that are worked with, ensuring that the patient has only one problem, e.g. depression. Ideal therapeutic conditions such as quiet rooms and dedicated reception are also present. Effectiveness research is essentially research carried out in the real world where therapists don't see people with just one difficulty, and tend to tailor their interventions according to the client's needs. Those of you who have worked in primary care may also be familiar with a working environment which may well be far from ideal! RCTs are highly controlled, and are very much geared to specificity (specific interventions with specific people in specific environments). While there may be an argument for their use in efficacy research, they do not lend themselves to be 'generalised out' into the hurly burly of primary care. The report then moves on to question the use of RCTs for some forms of psychotherapy, and examines how RCTs may favour forms of psychotherapy which focus on the reduction of symptoms as opposed to more characterological change.

Guy et al. then go on to re-examine the 'therapy as drug v therapy as dialogue' debate in the context of RCTs. They conclude that the RCT's journey from purely biomedical research (where they have demonstrated their worth) to that of researching psychological therapies, has proved problematic and has actually introduced more confounds than it has eliminated.

The final section of the report examines alternatives to the current system of research and guidelines. Guy et al. suggest that more credence be given to 'practice-based evidence', which uses current practice as a natural 'laboratory', the results of which are much more applicable to the real world of therapy. They suggest the use of CORE, which is not specifically aimed at measuring symptom reduction, as it examines well-being, inter-relational functioning and risk, making it more amenable to measuring change in a wide variety of therapeutic models. They also make a plea for more inclusion of qualitative methods and research in the construction of the guidelines.

Overall this is a comprehensive, critical and constructive review of the current NICE guidelines, and I would thoroughly recommend reading it if you feel bamboozled by the 'my therapy is more evidence based than yours' argument. It will also give you support if you need to argue your case when seeking Any Qualified Provider (AQP) status in the rapidly changing provision of psychological therapies in primary care.

References

Information Centre, The (2006/07) *UK General Practice Workload Survey*.

Mirowsky, J. and Ross, C. (2003) *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, 2nd edn. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

The Mind Gymnasium by Denis Postle

Our review in the previous issue of S&S omitted this resource's important sub-title – viz. *A Unique Digital Resource for Personal and Professional Development*. The 29 separate texts of The Mind Gymnasium can be accessed at http://www.mind-gymnasium.com/