The Future of Humanistic Psychology

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SYNOPSIS

In the psychotherapy/personal development world of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Humanistic Psychology inspired us and encouraged us to begin a lifetime of development and expansion without ever having to label ourselves as ill or lacking. Its future, hopefully, is to keep reminding us that the personal, the spiritual and the political are all part of the same human yearning to move beyond the old boundaries, boxes and diagnoses to new understandings and new realities. I mind less where it goes, than that it continue to peep through everything we create, and be our inspiration.

Humanistic Psychology was a wonderful thing when I was coming up in the psychotherapy/personal development world in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It meant everything that was young, progressive, open to change and politically on the side of the angels. It encouraged us to begin a lifetime of development and expansion without ever having to label ourselves as ill or lacking.

My father, Isaac Glouberman, who was a genuine seeker way ahead of his time, introduced me to Humanistic Psychology in the 1960s because he loved Abraham Maslow. He encouraged me to study at Brandeis University, where Maslow was teaching, and I did.

To be honest, I never took a course with Maslow, although of course we all studied his work. One of my friends put me off with her complaint that when Maslow set an essay question, and she made up her own instead, he did not accept this and failed her paper. I was shocked. That wasn't what I called free thinking. In retrospect, I suppose I was not good on boundaries. When I was a lecturer myself later, I would probably have done the same as he did, if a student had substituted their question for mine without a very good reason. No one ever did.

I remember also studying Eastern approaches to psychology, and the philosophy of Martin Buber, and deciding that what Maslow had done was not really new, that he had simply applied something that was already known to a field where it was not known. This was a good thing, but secretly I was not impressed. I was much more taken by Herbert Marcuse, also at Brandeis, with whom I did study, and who was considered the father of the New Left, as well as offering a radical approach to Freud in his book *Eros and Civilization*. Marcuse was a great and brilliant man, but actually so was Maslow. I didn't have my eye on the ball. I failed to see that Maslow's genius was the introduction of a whole new approach to a field that was stuck in the past.

In the 1970s, my father also introduced me to humanistic groupwork at a group work conference in New York City. At the time of the conference, I was living in England, and was in psychoanalytic therapy with Joseph Sandler, who was meant to be a top analyst, though it transpired that he was not my cup of tea. He had too many boundaries and not enough love for the young rather wild person I was at that time.

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My mother had died just before I came to England, when I was only 22, and I'd been trying to work on my feelings about her death in my therapy, without much success. It was as if her presence was hanging around, and I couldn't say goodbye. Now visiting my family and friends in NYC, I found myself at this seminal conference, and attending a workshop called 'The Psychodrama of Death', with a wonderful psychodramatist, Hannah Weiner.

When Hannah played my mother, she asked what I wanted. I told her I just wanted her to be alive somewhere, even if I could never see her. Hannah said, 'I can't do that for you'. I said, 'Well if you can't be alive, then I want you to be dead'. Hannah was a very big woman, but I pushed her out of that room effortlessly (and Hannah told me she was doing her best to resist) and slammed the door three times, to the cheers of the group.

Could you really push your dead mother out the door and be cheered when you slammed the door on her? Yes, in this new world you could. At that moment, I let go of the ghost that was haunting me.

My analyst understood how profound this event was when he saw me in London. He said 'You must be very disappointed in our work together'. He was right, of course.

My work on imagery, the work that has defined my approach and my life, came out of the outlook of Humanistic Psychology. Fritz Perls was part of the spirit of that movement. I can remember the first time I was in a workshop and someone introduced Fritz Perls' method of becoming the image in a dream. It was a life-changing, astounding moment, and I was in awe at the power of imagery. I came to see how it could be used as part of a normal education process, not just as a therapy.

And then, I remember the moment my friend Robin, who was in a personal development group with me, told me she was working on her 'stuff' at home. What? Personal development is not just in a group? The idea of self-help Imagework probably had its seed thought then.

Funnily enough, before I came to England, I had been accepted to work with Fritz Perls in his first training course in California. How glamorous was that? Instead I chose to come to the Henderson Hospital in Sutton and work as a lowly social therapist, in the therapeutic community set up by founder Maxwell Jones, who was no longer there. At the same time as I turned down Fritz Perls, I turned down a chance to be a psychologist working with Maxwell Jones himself, who had moved to Dingleton Hospital in Scotland.

It was a mad choice, knowing what I know now, but it was one that was consistent with the young idealist I was. My reasoning was that I wanted to learn the most I possibly could, and being totally uninterested in status, I thought that the best idea was to go to a new country (more difference) and be lower status and therefore closer to the patients (more connection). I was in search of truth, and I felt I couldn't know the truth if I was blinded by my culture and my assumptions.

Perhaps unconsciously I was also avoiding charismatic leaders in order to forge my own path, a path that later led to Skyros, Imagework, and, for that matter, to burnout and then *The Joy of Burnout*. I think I was also put off by being told that whether I worked with Fritz Perls or Maxwell Jones, I would have to sleep with them. That was seen as normal at that time. My liberation did not go that far.

On another level, it was part of the legacy of Humanistic Psychology, to attract those of us who were seekers and not simply followers.

I did eventually train with R.D. Laing, and the Philadelphia Association. Again, though perhaps not strictly humanistic, I considered Laing to be part of that fresh and radical humanistic approach to psychology and psychiatry which let go of labels, and chose to listen.

I won't go on waxing eloquent about the past when this piece is about the future. But the history, and my own personal experience of it, is probably a better guide to the future than the present day structures.

History tells us that the future of Humanistic Psychology cannot be like the past. Of its nature it was part of a particular time period, a new phenomenon responding to what was around. It expanded our limits, broke open our normal ways of thinking. If we try to hold on to what we have, which is an attitude you find in so many institutions and schools, we end up with an ossified way of thinking.

I've experienced that personally many times. Henderson Hospital, for example, had been created by Maxwell Jones as a revolutionary community environment in the setting of an NHS hospital. Each person, no matter what their rank, had one vote. But the new and revolutionary was no longer welcome when I was there in the late 1960s and he had gone. Apparently it needed the charismatic leader to keep it alive. I understand things changed later.

I discovered that being critical of what was going on, even in the most positive way, was unacceptable: 'Wait six months, and then you'll understand', they would say. Of course when six months were over, you'd lost the will to live, and had nothing to say! Or you'd left.

Furthermore, I was what Maxwell Jones called a 'social therapist', but in the official institutional status hierarchy that Maxwell Jones had sought to throw over, I was an assistant nurse. So I was at the bottom of a pecking order that wasn't meant to exist. Then I found out how to have an impact at our staff meetings: to get anything changed you had to either get a psychiatrist to agree with you, since they were highest in that non-existent pecking order, or you had to say it five times until everyone thought it was familiar and not new and then they passed it with a nod. Someone literally said 'If it was good enough for Maxwell Jones, it's good enough for me'. I wouldn't want that for Humanistic Psychology.

So for me, the future of Humanistic Psychology is for it to peep through everything we create and be our inspiration. It has so many wonderful windows to see us all as eternal seekers, and to teach us that rather than be ashamed of the fact that we need to do our psychological and spiritual homework, we can see it as a badge of courage.

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It reminds us that the personal, the spiritual and the political are all part of the same human yearning to move beyond the status quo to new understandings and new realities. It challenges us to be aware of our own limits, to go beyond what we 'know' is true, to be truly radical. Indeed, it tells us that we will never, never succeed if we simply box ourselves up in old categories, old thought forms, old diagnoses, nor will we be able to help others if we don't give them a chance to define themselves, rather than telling them who they are and what they need.

It encourages us to expand and expand, even when we can't quite see where it is taking us or who will join us.

The pioneers of Humanistic Psychology did that for us. We must do this for the generations that follow us.

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