

The Future of Humanistic Psychology

Gaie Houston

SYNOPSIS

The writer moves from memories of the early days of this journal, to making a case for radically different attitudes in theories of people, and in educational focus. She sees the importance of integrating neuroscience, anthropology, political science and every other related discipline, into a co-operative endeavour towards creating the psychological conditions most conducive to community, creativity and sense of fulfilment. Uneasy with much that is attributed to the idea of spirituality, she prefers that education should be co-operative, learning as much as teaching, and making people aware of the importance of groups of every size, along with an understanding of their own likely responses in differing contexts.

Being invited to write this piece was to me affirming of my sense of connectedness with like-minded people. Very warming. This sense had sometimes waned since the early days of *Self and Society*. At that time the Editorial Board, of which I was one, would meet monthly to eat a malodorous Chinese takeout meal in the editor's

office, and talk excitedly. Vivian Milroy, the first editor, always spoke of recording our talk and publishing it, but I cannot remember if this ever happened. I suspect that our conversation was a little like singing at a party: wonderfully touching in its emotion and quality to the singers as they sang, but cacophonous if replayed at a more sober and isolated moment.

So what would I like to happen next? The worst might be for there to be a humanistic party which sang and talked to itself in its own room, until it thought it was the bee's knees and the cat's pyjamas. Put more positively, I fervently hope for an integration and/or a coalition of the major branches of psychology and psychotherapy. Rather than seeing Humanistic Psychology as a third force, I would like there to be one force which made use of the insights and skills of behaviourist and psychoanalytic thinking, of sociology and anthropology, of every damn thing conducive to our better understanding and skills with getting on with each other and the rest of the planet. Some of this is happening openly already. Some is happening covertly, with accompanying cries of plagiarism or thievery of ideas and methods.

The sober and isolated moment, out of the swim of this journal, has lasted a good many years for me, as the editorship changed and I showed as a name on a list, but had no other presence. In the interval I have sometimes groaned at articles which have struck me, in my own well-preserved prejudice, as wafty, or separatist, or generally Spiritual with a big 'S'. So one of my hopes is for integration of disciplines as earthy as neuroscience into Humanistic Psychology. I do not really understand what people mean when they use the word 'spiritual'. When

“Ordinary reality is so mind-bogglingly amazing that it is quite enough to be getting on with, without any mysterious add-ons.”



people describe it to me, it sounds like a fusion of what I experience as hope and of love, in some of its various senses. I cannot see that it needs a separate word.

To me there is something called mind, which I understand to be the functioning of the brain, in the same way that body movement is the functioning of the muscles. This word 'brain' is in some ways a shorthand, standing for the myriad and amazing processes of every part of the body, resulting in the aware and unaware process of that organ itself. It seems to me that in our evolution, we have needed will, determination, optimism, hope, in massive measure, to be represented in our mental processes. Otherwise we might have jacked it all in and settled for peaceful oblivion, when opposing sub-species turned up at the cave entrance, or when another horrendous Ice Age set in. So I incline to think that hope, the perhaps steady, perhaps heady belief, that There is Something Better, that there will be summer, there will be a healthy mate, a child born, there will be peace, recovery from illness, harvest, a fat pig to eat – all these hopes have held up enough times to help form this construct, Spirituality. From being a yearning or hope, it has sometimes coalesced into a belief, a Knowing, that there is a god or heaven or higher plane or Something Beyond Us or whatever, outside ordinary reality.

Now I think ordinary reality is so mind-bogglingly amazing that it is quite enough to be getting on with, without any mystery add-ons.

My unease with the word is partly when it seems to denote something outside the body. And a bit superior – something for the elect, perhaps to be honed by periods of retreat from the world. Well, as far as I can see, the world is all we have got. And the world is all the extraordinary riches of the planet, and it is other people. Neuroscience is showing us some of the amazingness. I could fill this piece with examples, but will take just one.

Sympathy, empathy, whatever we call intuitive response to each other, turns out often to be a function of perfectly observable mirror neurons, dancing away as we interact with other people or the world, and creating internal glimpses and hints of what it is to be the other. How remarkable and how vital to our social existence is this physical system, so recently discovered. This leads to my hope that Humanistic Psychology will embrace the new understandings made possible by this science, and if necessary, discard what is more esoteric. Spirituality has the word 'higher' often associated with it. 'Higher' sounds like 'off the ground'. It is then the opposite of humility, which in its root means 'on the ground'. Neuroscience has the capacity to keep us on the ground, gradually accounting for all we have built into our species over millions of generations, rather than putting that responsibility outside us.

There is some of my hope for Humanistic Psychology as a theory of people. Then comes the hope of how we make use of our theory, our understandings. The saying that it makes more sense to build a fence at the top of a cliff, than just to have an ambulance at the bottom of it, appeals to me as a slogan for all trained therapeutic practitioners now. I think that, sadly, it will be a long time before we can retire the ambulance. The appalling divide still widening between rich and poor will partly account for that. So what do I want us to do prophylactically, at the top of the cliff?

What seems to me the best place to intervene is at the beginning. I would like to see humanistic

practitioners working with parents and families, and to support teachers in the social part of schooling. I have seen excellent things happening in this way in primary and junior schools. Later, the national curriculum and public exams seem very often to drive humanity out of the window. Sometimes this is to do with the individualistic stance of all concerned.

Long ago I saw a Chinese film which showed in detail the working of a self-criticism group in a school. It gave flesh to what I had witnessed in China myself, when I was there in 1977. The teacher came into the playground and blew the whistle to end break. A boy threw a ball which hit her as she turned away. She threatened some punishment, as I remember. Then the whole class and teacher met as a self-criticism group, and gradually the background to the incident was revealed. The teacher spoke of the humiliation of the hit, and the pain, and asked for an apology. After hesitation, the culprit told how the teacher had lost his exercise book the week before, and not believed that he had handed it in. When she found it, the teacher had not apologised. This she now did, sincerely, and the boy followed suit. This seemed to me a very proper resolution, which left people closer to each other than before, with no rancour left in them. That same film showed how, when a boy got very low marks for arithmetic, the whole class stayed behind to help him master what he had not understood. His bad marks were seen as a product of the group, and a slur on the group.

An instance I quote often to students is of the pupils at Winchester, one of the most academically successful schools in England. When doing their prep, they are encouraged to leave their study doors open, and confer and discuss together. As in China, social learning is recognised. Collaborating is seen to be of at least as great, if not a great deal more value as competing.

I would like to see us running groups with collaborative values and openness, both for pupils and for teachers. The teachers of a London Comprehensive school used their own money to have me in for a weekly session, which was in part a support group, and in part a learning group for finding more ways of fulfilling what

“Whenever I have seen school classes encouraged to sit and talk in the ways familiar to humanistic practitioners..., the outcomes have been excellent.”



can be called the pastoral care part of their work. Those teachers approached me. I would like more of us to invent and advertise ways of helping directly like this, to strengthen teachers and show them and students how to recognize, and how to be more appropriately open with, each other. Whenever I have seen school classes encouraged to sit and talk in the ways familiar to humanistic practitioners, but still foreign to very many others, the outcomes have been excellent. Helping this to happen is a future I would love to see.

In this same vein, but at a wider level, my largest hobby-horse is to educate everyone about group membership. Perhaps as you read what I wrote about China, you made a quick judgement, about Mao and Communism and Tiananmen Square, and thus my naiveté in being taken in by anything to do with that regime. I hope not. We are group animals. The group exists before the individual, who is indivisible from the whole. However, we have invented computers and the internet and mobile phones. Virtual relating, virtual contact, virtual danger and reward and all manner of stimulus make it possible to be busy and interested without one single jot of eye or skin contact. With music stuffed into both ears, we are encouraged to disappear

into a closed inner world, beguiled with these room-fresheners of the psyche.

It looks as if it will get harder for people to engage, or even want to engage directly, with anyone else. But we are interdependent atoms, cells, whatever, in a system. That sense of interdependence needs urgently to be brought into everyone's awareness, if we are to make any kind of a fist at saving the planet, let alone making loving lives.

As ever, children are more likely than grown-ups to be open to this truth. Learning more about government and political systems seems to me a crucial part of education. Taking a class to a local Council meeting, and then having time with counsellors and officers, and being set to solve whatever problems face the Council at that moment, is one economical way to introduce the idea of interdependence at more than person-to-person level. Humanistic Psychology is holistic. If no-one else notices what is essential in education, it is up to us to act.

There is more that I would like to view as necessary rather than elective education about groups. Wilfred Bion said the pair was a denial of the group. Much of the social structure and indeed the architecture of the present bears out this statement. Harry Stack Sullivan said that the pair is the building-block of society. And it is that too. But the pair and the singleton lack the buffeting and emoting and range of opinions and responses that is there at any moment in a group. I am speaking here of a small group, one where the people know each other well enough to be fairly free. Such small groups challenge prejudice and provide stimulus, excitement, novelty, and so enlarge the lives of the members. Humanistic practitioners are in my experience good at introducing the values and skills needed to make such small groups enormously enhancing. But they more often are seen as ambulance groups than top-of-the-cliff groups that will help prevent a fall. I would like to see them stalking out into the community and surprising more and more people into such warmth and rewarding experience.

Sociologists have often shown that if two groups are doing roughly the same task, but out of sight of

each other, they will feel scared and hostile towards each other. So it is not enough to establish countless, cosy loving groups who want to lurk indoors and hate their neighbours. We shall need to help them find ways of communicating, or at least of recognising that their feelings towards another group may stem from their own fear, rather than some strange quality of the others.

As if that is not enough, I want us to find ways, a bit as Moreno did so brilliantly, of working with communities, large groups, to familiarise everyone with the good and bad possibilities of reaction and behaviour in such a configuration. Because we have been raised with an inflated and false sense of autonomy, it is difficult to take on board how quickly we can become part of a mob. That is an important learning. Another is about how to hold on to autonomy in a crowd, and find a voice. 'Democracy' is a word thrown about grandly by politicians. But it will work better when more people think and trust themselves, and dare to speak out. And that is more likely when their feelings and thoughts have been tested and supported in intimate groups, reference groups, whatever you like to call them.

I have been offered *carte blanche*, and have chosen to speculate and daydream a future for us. It would have been as easy to interpret the title another way, and talk about power struggles within the therapeutic world, and the tendency of the loudest voice to win. Instead, I have described what is certainly radical, but also perfectly practical. It will involve a lot of work, and a preference for humility rather than pride, and enormous creativity. It could be fun. ⑤



Gaie Houston used to be a playwright, has worked as a presenter and in other roles in the BBC, is a senior lecturer at The Gestalt Centre London, teaches and supervises in the UK and in many other countries, and has just published her tenth book on aspects of psychotherapy and group behaviour. She is author of *Gestalt Counselling in a Nutshell* (Sage, 2012). You can contact Gaie via her website, www.gaiehouston.co.uk