Long Long Ago

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SYNOPSIS

Humanistic roots and beginnings 40 years ago in this country are the topics on which I have been invited to write. To me the 1970s are not long ago. And they are at the same time obscured in some dust-filled attic of my mind. Dates may be smudged. I shall offer this account as a very subjective impression of what now seems something of a hiccup in the po-faced history of British emotionality in the twentieth century. It was also a time of so many innovations, which I can best describe by way of my own experience through those years.

The USA has to be my immediate root, for that is where, at the end of the 1960s, I first attended a T-Group, and had what now seems like an almost Damascene conversion to an educational method I had, as a playwright, groped to represent. 'Educational method' is the stuffy phrase I have used here. I mean something more like a learning or self-development style. These words, too, seem just as inadequate, part of a different jargon. I am talking about a transition from being encouraged to be a brain on a stalk, trafficking only in words, except in the heady moments of passion, that I secretly felt was the sole point of life. Suddenly a model was presented of noticing and reporting feeling, even before reporting thought. That meant noticing what was going on in me in spite of the clicking and whirring of my brain box. I said heady, but all this was feely and touchy, a life of sensation rather than of thought.

I came back from National Training Laboratories with the advice to do some learning at the Tavistock Institute, which I did, and which gave depth to all that came afterwards. At first I was in the north of England, where I joined Gordon Lawrence of the 'Tavi', and others, who were setting up weekend events greatly influenced by the American consultants who had been affected in their turn by Lee Bradford, Richard Beckhard and other trainers from MIT and UCLA with whom I had worked in the States. We plunged into encounter groups and Vertical Slice groups in industry and the community. Looking back, I see much of this as fearless floundering, the toddler's first steps ending every few metres in a sharp descent to the backside.

In 1970, using my new learning from NTL, I dramaturged a play with a youth group from Newton Aycliffe. They saw themselves as having had a rubbish education and being destined for rubbish jobs. But they had had the chutzpah to write and invite me as a playwright to work with them. They had been to London and seen *Hair*, which had excited them enormously. So together we wrote a decently subversive play about The System, which won them a silver medal in performance, and which was published in two collections through the influence of the Glasgow playwright C.P. Taylor, and has been translated and performed in such unlikely languages as Afrikaans.

Back in London in 1971 I went to events at Quaesitor, which was as far as I understand, one of the earliest inspirations of what came to be called the humanistic movement in London. I cannot any longer remember when the Association for Humanistic Psychology came into my awareness. But I know I attended many events directly and indirectly sponsored by them, and was part of what now seem mildly insane conversations about how to run organisations without anything that could be termed a hierarchy. The idea seems fine. The conversations were sometimes the crazy part.

Then I enrolled at the North London Poly on a diploma in behavioural science. This course was remarkable in many ways. John Southgate, Tom Osborn, Gary Robins and Troy Langley were the staff. However, the ethos was that the students were in charge. This meant that we students devised the curriculum, made the submission to the academic board, and awarded diplomas to each other.

Before writing this piece, I read John Heron's impressive account of his applications of what we could call humanistic principles, in many organisations that might have been expected to shut their doors to such ideas. To me this is the admirable, respectable end of that movement. Where I was engaged was more ramshackle and dubious, but at the time completely engaging and exhilarating. In DABS, the Diploma in Applied Behavioural Science at the North London Poly, we used the considerable range of skills already there in the student group, to teach each other, on weekday meetings, and weekend events in country settings. We also hired trainers, some excellent, one at least who had to be thrown out in the middle of a weekend. We read and argued and experimented on ourselves and each other in a way that would purse the lips and raise the eyebrows of any therapy trainer nowadays. But all this was before counselling and psychotherapy were the avenues to humanistic methods. Human behaviour was our interest, and we produced a rich display of it. We were the evidence base for findings that have influenced practitioners in many professions and settings. We students were those practitioners, or future practitioners.

One offshoot of DABS was a BBC television series on behaviour in small groups, presented by me and a young psychiatrist. I know we opened the eyes of the BBC producer and director to the fascination of process observation. And the series was used in University psychology departments for years as an avoidant teaching aid. What it did for viewers I am not so sure.

Yorkshire Television used me just afterwards to present two series on adult sexuality. These programmes were definitely influenced by the 1970s Zeitgeist of dealing with what had been taboo. It is a comment on this Zeitgeist at Yorkshire, that though we had enormous mail and had reason to believe we had enlightened many viewers, the company never made the third series, which would have moved away from the strictly heterosexual.

By 1974 I was working for Brigid Procter on a counselling course. It was the first place I had found for direct teaching of humanistic methods, and I think it must have been among the very first places to formalise training of humanistic counsellors.

Partly encouraged by the workshops of Ischa Bloomberg, who had begun a Gestalt training in London, I often taught this topic, on our pleasantly informal course, where it was received with almost embarrassing enthusiasm. In the first days, everybody attended everything. Students and staff listened to lectures and went as participants to workshops, even before I had introduced Tom Osborn to the course. Brigid welcomed his advice, which was also mine, to make this course student-led, subject to collective decision-making, as DABS had been.

We created a model which persisted for many years, and moved with the course to the Institute of Education at London University. We started every academic year with a residential weekend, in which the students decided what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it, and then negotiated with staff and outside speakers. The content of the course was probably in line with what the staff would have designed. The differences were in ownership and enthusiasm. Timid students were often reduced to floods of tears in the planning weekend; but they ended up as a tight ship with a proud crew. Brigid introduced clinical supervision in 1975; she must have been amongst the very earliest to pay attention to quality control and continuing support for humanistic counsellors.

Respectability and accountability were being emphasised here, while at the same time in other places I was going to wild workshops where only raw food was allowed, where you slept on the floor and mixed with people from Holland, France, Italy, Denmark – so many glamorous countries.

At the very same time Tricia Scott and I were working twice a week in a Home Office experiment, which consisted of putting about 30 convicted criminals, some with very low violence thresholds, into hostels, from which they had to travel each day to a house in Brixton staffed by probation officers. Here they attended therapy groups of several kinds, and a large group facilitated by Tricia and me, and attended by staff, 'crims' (as they liked to call themselves) and any visitors. Any failure to show would send the offending 'crim' back to Brixton prison. This happened very little, and re-conviction rates from this form of sentence

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were very low. But after four years a budget cut brought the experiment (which was a good deal cheaper per capita than prison) to an end, without any research on it, though foreign visitors, judges and JPs had been sent in droves to admire the self-reliance and responsibility this system evoked.

The curious overlaps between the visitors to the project and the 'crims' prompted me to write a radio play about this experience, called *Animals in the Zoo*. I was allowed to write it in a small boiler room in the building, where 'crims' would put their heads round the door and say, 'Ere, Miss, you ought to put this bit in'. One of these bits was the story of a child of four, taken to the seaside by his parents, bought an ice-cream and told to wait. And wait. Until the police found him, and he was put in a children's home, from where he had graduated to knife crime. That bit did get in. The Probation Service used the BBC recording in training for some years, to my knowledge.

Then there were workshops for the big multi-national industries, usually run by Americans. Like the Home Office project, they were about creativity and autonomy, as a reaction to a general culture of conformism and hierarchy. They tended to have a T-Group theme, and were spoken of at cocktail parties as Dangerous. Certainly, the occasional employee threw up his job after attending one, and went off to make harpsichords or lead T-Groups of his own. Job Enrichment became a theme, meaning devolving responsibility. At its extreme was something brand-named Open Systems. The core of the idea was an analogy with organisms, which are made of interdependent semi-autonomous cells with efficient inflow and outflow. For a time, one division of a large company, to my knowledge, adopted the system wholesale. This meant a levelling of salaries, and considerable role flexibility within each of the numerous small units that took the place of large departments.

By 1981 I was one of the first trustees of LIFT, the London International Festival of Theatre, set up by two remarkable young graduates from Warwick, Rose de Wend Fenton and Lucy Neal. I was their unpaid organisational consultant, and we set up something along the participative lines of Open Systems. This persisted, and was warmly appreciated, certainly into this century, when they handed the organisation over to a new management. It may still go on, but I am out of touch with them.

After one intensive bout of training in the States during the 1970s, I came back to a mostly empty house and had what I might now call a psychotic episode. I had the sense of seeing what everything was all about, and I wrote a book, never published, in which I polished off authoritarianism, the education system, human nature, politics and much else in a way that astonishes and even impresses me when I look back on it. A poet said it was written in words of gold. His wife said it would not fit into any publisher's categories.

The humanistic movement did not exactly take the nation by storm. But somewhere in that decade Vivian Milroy began *Self and Society*. The ideas were now getting into print.

Another enterprise I see as typical of the time was Larry Butler's Playspace. This was a series of workshops at what was then the Central London Poly on the Euston Road. There were plenty of us to run and attend them, though they were nothing to do with CPD or getting credits towards a degree. People at that time wanted to explore and emote and laugh a lot and fall madly in love and learn to be better communicators, and much more, and Playspace enabled some of that. The workshops were invited into other organisations, and some were led by remarkably able people.

Larry also had evening meetings of a dozen or so

of us in his and Mary's squat in The Diorama. In these we did our best to combine the social and the encounter group ethos. At one of them John Heron and I were both accused of being too stoical, as I remember. It was probably true.

Jenner Roth was a fellow student on DABS, and she and I set up our own workshops. We would travel anywhere we were invited. I have confused memories of us both sitting on my bed in some guest house one early morning, consulting a notebook of encounter group exercises I had compiled, both very nervous. Now she runs Spectrum, a successful humanistic training organisation. I daresay both of us now have rather less need for nervousness.

At the very end of the decade Ursula Faussett set up The Gestalt Centre, London, in her house, with plenty of dedicated students for the mostly experiential learning, with the fees allegedly kept in a teapot. It awarded no certificates or diplomas, and I do not remember it as being a training for anything of commercial intention. Around the same time Dina Glouberman and Yannis Andricopoulos invented the Skyros Holiday in Greece, with the open intention of giving the crowds of participants a taste of community life, as an alternative to nuclear families. Everyone helped with cooking and cleaning before plunging wholeheartedly into self-development workshops.

I am describing a spirit of enthusiasm for understanding human nature, and getting on better with each other. It has much to do with what in Classical Greece would have been called 'virtue'. As I write, I notice the differences now in both these organisations, which are probably like many others over the same period of time. The Gestalt Centre is now a psychotherapy training centre, with dedicated premises, paid administrators and a deserved reputation for rigour. The Skyros Centre still offers that taste of community that often leads to desired personal change, to lasting friendships, love, even marriage. But the physical conditions have been softened enormously as a spirit of ensuite has sidled into part at least of that place that was occupied by spontaneity and making do, by squats and marches and novelty. All this is meant as a historical comment, not as a criticism of either position. What is interesting to me is both the formalisation of organisations, and the growth of luxury in this period.

Feminism was not the first topic I thought of when I began this piece of writing. But it was a strong theme of the time for some of us, and showed in contradictory ways. Troy Langley, that beautiful and furiously intelligent young staff member on DABS, was wont to sit and knit during workshops. This was provocative feminism. Many women were struggling at that time to achieve the same recognition as men, and that could mean throwing away their knitting needles and taking up shouting for equal pay. Troy was two steps ahead.

I remember John Rowan saying that in this country we had the sixties in the seventies. Certainly, Paul Goodman's anarchic messages were being explored here in squats, CND marches and much else. Admittedly, the Beatles had happened in the 1960s, and their influence on the humanistic movement I see as great. They stirred us all up to reconsider reverence and appropriate obsequiousness, even states of consciousness.

As I look back, I remember a capacity for joyfulness that we seemed to foster. Ugly words like self-actualisation and self-development came from the States, I think, to describe our earnest antics. Joy and earnestness may not seem likely inhabitants of one sentence. Yet they are clear to see in much of children's play, and that is how I remember those early years of the humanistic movement. We had yet to turn our explorations into degree courses, and take on the gravitas necessary to being the therapists and other workers in the helping professions that so many of us have become. Childhood does not last. But it is good to remember it being lived out with such enthusiasm as we brought to it in the seventies. S

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