

The Future of Humanistic Psychology

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SYNOPSIS

I believe that Humanistic Psychology, with its commitment to embrace all that it means to be a human being, has a vital role to play as new insecurities emerge in this time of uncertainty and transition to 'we know not what'. Rather than being dragged backwards, drawn by the energy of contraction, giving way to caution and fear of exclusion from controlling bodies which will subsequently be seen as blatantly inadequate and limiting, it's important to remember our roots. We must endeavour neither to react nor capitulate to the disheartening backsliding which so often occurs within the underlying evolutionary expansion of consciousness.

How are we, at this particular stage in the long, complex journey of unfolding consciousness, to do justice to the full spectrum of human experience? What I most value about Humanistic Psychology is not only its acknowledgement, but its active exploration of this spectrum. Commitment to open-minded enquiry follows as an inevitable consequence, all the more salient as preoccupation with either the desired or dreaded 'regulation' of 'professionals' in the field of psychotherapy and counselling fuels a contraction of perspective. How did this stealthy slippage towards Reductionism come about?

In the eighties and nineties I spoke of the effects of what I termed 'Ego Imperialism' (see *The Reluctant Adult*, 1993). This not only energises the blossoming of the Victim Archetype, but the concurrent creative urge towards individuation (enabling the taking of personal responsibility for one's choices in life) tends to be waylaid and hijacked into individualism. The last thing acknowledged by ego is the uniqueness of each and every human being, as this makes comparisons between us redundant. An unintegrated ego, being fundamentally insubstantial, can only too easily be drawn beyond its necessary task of delineation, which the ability to make comparisons is designed to serve. Comparison then feeds notions which go beyond that of being a differentiated entity: it enables the notion of being 'better' than others which, of course, carries the threat of being 'worse' than others. What was intended to boost a sense of security inadvertently undermines it and a circularity results. Mechanisms which are necessary for the phenomenon of consciousness can only too easily be subverted and can, when this occurs, carry a heavy price.¹

Is this not mirrored on the socio-political level by the spread of Western capitalism with its emphasis on competition as prior to that of co-operation? Compelling but increasingly insubstantial as it loses its original grounding, capitalism has to adapt at a radical level or play itself out – just as life itself has eventually to respond to real conditions, or else live itself to collapse or death. An ego-dominated psyche not only regards fellow human beings as competitors, but Nature as an object of exploitation, a resource from which to extract whatever we want and believe we need; and the more incomplete we experience ourselves to be, the more we feel driven, even justified, to continue in this vein. In 2008, Madeleine Bunting wrote in the *Guardian Weekly* 'Ultimately neo liberal capitalism is self-destructive'. We could add: yes, and destructive to the individual selves caught up in it.

A parallel surge in ego-level 'takeover' of religion is

revealed both in ever more ardent and reductive forms of fundamentalism, or in a progressive diminution of energy – a sense of gradually fading out as access to wonder and mystery is curtailed. Spiritual energy is often left somewhat rootless (unless still culturally entwined with its ancient timeless Source) and thus moves and unfolds here and there, all over the world, within and through and between individuals.

What is the role of Humanistic Psychology in this 'story'? Not only its underlying philosophical base in a holistic metaphysics, but its insistence on applying this on the experiential level of human exchange is surely of crucial import.

As I see it, Humanistic Psychology evolved as an inspired expression of the creative impulse in those drawn towards self-development and/or involved in psychotherapy. It was about the individual, in commonality with other individuals, taking responsibility for their wellbeing along with the healing of their woundings rather than being defined by the 'experts' with their rationalisations and theories about the Other (i.e. patients). A flurry of fresh ideas and practices were born, developed and offered, tasted and tested, through active participation. A search towards greater consciousness and fulfilment ensued, courageously experimental, flawed and sometimes chaotic, but essentially liberating and life affirming. An experiential and holistic approach established a place in the field of practical psychology, embracing body, mind and spirit with the built-in assumption that those engaging in such exploration would take responsibility for their choice to participate in such explorations. The very idea of 'regulation' would have appeared alien, and would have stifled the green shoots of what so many in the field now take for granted.

What are practitioners in the arena of therapeutic human exchange now bringing on ourselves if, or as, we begin to find ourselves tempted to claim and control, formalise and scientise a relational activity which is closer to an art and cannot help but work differently for different people? Have not many who are drawn to Humanistic Psychology begun to let fear slip in, often dressed up as 'being responsible' or 'realistic', and thus found themselves sliding towards professionalisation, unaware of those aggregations of collective misplaced ego energy? Clients (or co-workers) fall into the background as debates ensue about who should be included and excluded among those who erstwhile were free to focus on them. If clients are seen as victims who need specialised protection or direction, rather than sensitive respect, those who deem

this necessary will inevitably, even if inadvertently, end up as victims of controlling systems themselves. What a diversion of energy! And who decides? By what criteria? On and on and on, while the immediate urgent needs of actual clients recede into oblivion. What an ironic outcome of the rise in risk and safety rhetoric.

And so I ask again, what is the role of Humanistic Psychology in this 'story'? I believe it has a vital role to play as new insecurities emerge in this time of uncertainty and transition to 'we know not what'. Rather than being dragged backwards, drawn by the energy of contraction, giving way to caution and fears of exclusion from controlling bodies which will subsequently be seen as blatantly inadequate and limiting, may we remember our roots. May we continue to embrace, in ourselves and in those with whom we work, all that it means to be a human being.

Only by acknowledging the whole of who we are – body, heart, mind, soul and spirit – can ego relax into a less dominant role. Only then can ego cease exacerbating our insecurity by over-reaching its necessary contribution of delineation on the three-dimensional plane. Only then can we give fitting attention and weight to the uniqueness and mystery of each human being. And only then can we become resilient enough to be able to respond creatively to the new and unknown challenges that lie ahead, for they are likely to be exacting.

As previously posited, we face the phenomenon of global capitalism fuelled by the essentially insubstantial but inflated energy of 'Ego Imperialism', and thus glorifying highly organised yet anarchic competition, not just for natural resources, but for what we do not actually need (other than to boost ego). It is not surprising we eventually end up trading fictions – packaged figures with no material base whatsoever, deficit financing (which even the vast US arms industry cannot make good) with increasing reliance on elusive future 'growth', fanning active encouragement of more and more people taking on more and more debt.² The inherent vulnerability of non-holistic, ego-driven systems is all too evident, and it is fascinating to witness a political culture that so reveres rationality increasingly reduced to blind faith and the manipulation of 'facts' through the game of statistics. And all this relying on a climate of conscious or semi-conscious deception.

Our profession is already tainted with this global pull to rationalise and ignore what it cannot deliver. This is evidenced in the proliferation of training courses for therapists and counsellors (and this includes those with a Humanistic Psychology orientation) in the full knowledge

that there are not enough jobs for everyone. The pretence that a degree or two will solve the problem has become a means of upping the package – a selling point. The acceptance of students looking for a career and who have never had any therapy themselves, or shown an interest in focussed self-development, is another worrying tendency. Client needs are easily marginalised if the agenda is dictated by forces outside of them. It isn't only the bankers who have been sliding into a loss of integrity. It could be any one of us, including people we value and respect.

I believe that we must wake up and stand aside from these defective trends, as we did some decades ago – although at that time the dangers and limitations we hoped to transcend appeared more specific to our field, then dominated by psychiatry with its labelling and emphasis on pathology (see Barnett's *People, Not Psychiatry*, 1973). Humanistic Psychology recognised that a fundamental shift was necessary: an expansion in how we see ourselves as human beings.³ This needs to be affirmed afresh. The holding of a well grounded space or context that is inclusive of the spiritual dimension experienced by human beings, and the integration of such experience in the lives of individuals, is one of our greatest contributions to the field in which we work and one of our most crucial tasks for the future, as we move towards an increasingly secularised Western world.

I myself arrived in the experimental and exploratory arena of early Humanistic Psychology days straight from the world of academic philosophy, having just completed an exam in formal logic. A few weeks earlier I had been visited by a most unsought and unwelcome intuition. While gazing at an avenue of trees in South London I suddenly knew I had to give up my studies. They had become an absorbing passion which at that time balanced domestic life and motherhood, and I knew in the same instant that I would fall into a state of depression if I did give them up. However, since early childhood I had always known that I must follow such inner promptings. Sure enough, I plunged into a place of internal darkness that my intense head activity had previously held at bay; thinking about metaphysical matters had eased the pain of my reluctant atheism. I was rescued by a flyer advertising Encounter Groups being dropped through our letterbox. A commitment to four evenings was required. I had never heard of such things but signed up out of curiosity. Although stunned and amazed by this new mode of interaction, after two evenings I found I was 'working' in the centre of the group myself. Within a few weeks, I tracked down and joined a one year 'intensive' course in bodywork. My whole world changed and I was no

longer depressed.

However, the lack of evidence-based data, let alone feasible argument, for the array of assumptions and spiritual notions that others took as truth, astounded and taxed me greatly, in spite of becoming as passionate about Bio-Energetics as I had been about philosophy. What liberation, when one day I relieved myself of the burden of deciding whether someone else's views (or even my own) were *either* true or false. I decided to suspend this practice and replace it with discerning if someone felt authentic to me. What mattered was making a real connection with who they happened to be as a unique fellow human being. Gradually, through my own incremental experience, sometimes startling and inexplicable in purely rational terms, and yet undeniable as a lived reality, I could do no other than reclaim the immediacy of the spiritual knowings that had sustained me as a child.

Ian McGilchrist in his fascinating book *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009), makes a brilliantly compelling and informed case for the necessity of letting the right brain, with its all inclusive intuitive consciousness, lead while welcoming the necessary service of the left brain as *its emissary*. This is precisely what Humanistic Psychology stood for and practised in its initiating days. The powerful reign of left-brain dominance which rose to ascendance in the seventeenth century (what we call the Enlightenment) has served its time. It has both affirmed and encouraged the robust questioning of the independent rational mind, and brought about phenomenal advancement in the mechanical and technological arena, but it cannot handle

‘...left-brain dominance... cannot handle a holistic appreciation of what it is to be a human being’



a holistic appreciation of what it is to be a human being, nor see why the right brain is so essential for this purpose. The job of the left brain is to be selective and blot out anything extraneous to a particular focus. It literally does not see, or take account of, that which lies outside its selected task. It does not aim to know the whole picture and is not set up to do so. All great scientists rely on flashes of right brain intuition and creative thought both to explore and actualise the possible. Mathematicians posit imaginary numbers to further the power of equations which later result in effective applications on the material plane. The left brain cannot cope with mystery, it is not surprising therefore that its dominance gave birth to Literalism, Reductionism and Realism without even being aware that these were perspectives only – mere ‘ways of seeing’ the world, enabling the illusion of having the truth. Unfortunately the clarity afforded by selection, or unacknowledged abstraction, from the intricate and ever mobile complexity of the whole supports this illusion. The left brain can never deal with, let alone apprehend, ontological unity.

Deprived of the means of acknowledging what we do not know, the prominence of this bias invited arrogance and rendered understanding of our full humanity unavailable or radically diminished. It also left the field clear for the inflation of ego with the costly and dysfunctional repercussions previously described. Given that this can never serve workers in our field, Humanistic Psychology with its right/left brain balance has an important, and urgent, contribution to make at this point in the unfolding of consciousness.

I remember when working in a residential group setting, the thrill and liberation of experiencing the mystery of the Other; both the commonality and the inherent mystery. And then discovering the fruitfulness of honouring that mystery which also continually reveals itself the more you honour it. We can never fully know another (although we know ourselves more fully *through* the Other), and in the respectful wonder and fascination and appreciation of difference, we discover that more and more becomes evident and we dare to find ways to communicate to that Other what they reveal of who they are. Yet far from allowing the leadership of the right brain in this way, it seems that training courses in our field give ever more prominence to left brain preoccupations. Surely we betray all we once stood for if we move away from giving priority to in-the-moment utterly creative and unplanned occurrences of connection with another, that no theorising or writing of papers and getting of further

degrees can win for us.

It is essential that we take stock and honour our genesis. The establishment of connection with the Other, at whatever level they endeavour to offer of themselves, and responding, if possible, with that level in oneself; being in the living moment with them, knowing not where it can take us: from the ordinary, the petty, tainted or tragic, obscure or self-evident or perhaps sublime. The bonus is that learning through connection with the Other leads to a further unfolding of oneself, and to the discovery of new levels of consciousness.

Reciprocal learning – this is how I see the essence of Humanistic Psychology and thus the seed for the continual regeneration of its future, with all our work experientially-based. Inspired and structured by creative theorising certainly, but with the hypotheses and theories elucidated in training as far as possible face to face rather than primarily through the written word. Likewise the assessment of how a trainee understands those theories. I am a great lover of theories, and enjoy exploring them, but have learned to hold them lightly. I believe Jung declared, ‘As soon as you are in front of an individual patient, drop all the theories’. He certainly had quite a lot to drop!

Theories are like different intellectual species which illuminate different modes of psychic and energetic structure and expression. My foundational training was with Gerda Boyeson, who founded the Institute of Biodynamic Psychology in London. She embodied what she taught and thus communicated the reality of unfolding life energy, along with the means of accessing and regulating that life energy, and thus the biodynamic nature of being-in-the-world. She herself didn’t advocate the practice of mixing different methods and approaches to therapy, what she called ‘fruit salad’. However such an approach could be viewed as exploring different ‘fruits’ for different people in different circumstances or on different occasions, and seeing if they bring forth illumination and greater wellbeing for that client. This is how I see that vital combination of inclusiveness and particularity expressed in the rich and comprehensive range of therapeutic practices that characterise Humanistic Psychology in its responsiveness to the diversity within our oneness.

It is the unique individual expression of our common nature that Humanistic Psychology endeavours to address. And the creativeness of the different approaches that have evolved under this title could be seen not as fruit salad but as a bunch of flowers – each whole and distinct in itself and thus ‘right’ and therapeutically releasing and revealing for different individuals in their own particularity.

It is of vital importance that we stand clear and firm and resist the current pull towards the dominance of more contained models with a set number of sessions, while not excluding that such methods have some value for some people. We must be alert to the danger of any creeping resignation with regard to this trend as some sort of inevitable convergent reality.

If Humanistic Psychology is to have a vibrant future, it could do well to sustain the spirit of its vibrant past. It is not a call to mimic the past, but to reconnect with the source that enabled the courageous and innovative growth of the Humanistic Psychology movement. After a period of contraction and control, consciousness at some point will expand once more. After a season of regulation and reduction to the measurable, continued out-of-date left brain dominance and thus the prestige of numerical outcomes, tick boxes, caution and reductionist notions of experimentation, I feel confident that a fresh thrust of consciousness will surge forth yet again. I believe that Humanistic Psychology, if it holds to being truly humanistic, will then ride on a further tide of courageous innovation, based on the lived appreciation of the pain and wonder of being human.

We must endeavour neither to react nor capitulate to the disheartening backsliding which so often occurs within the underlying evolutionary expansion of consciousness, and I find it helpful to view this present state of contraction in our field within this wide-ranging context. Helpful because it allows an uncompromising short-term pessimism while embracing an irrepressible optimism and confidence in the thrust of life itself. It is not surprising that agonising excursions and countless deviations occur as we attempt to integrate the complexity of who we are. It appears that all life on Earth evolved in this marvellous but hazardous process of Becoming, and so we human beings, who have the most complex journey to undertake, are equally vulnerable. For we have many dimensions of Being to integrate before we become free enough to enter into fully loving relationships with each other and All That Is.

I believe the time will come when ego relaxes into its necessary function as an instrument of delineation employed by the self, each individual active on a three-dimensional plane but informed by the multi-dimensional awareness of soul (mediated by the phenomena of imagination, intuition and inspiration), and the promptings of spirit: the Whole emanating as a dynamic all-embracing collective of unique sparks of conscious loving.

Humanistic Psychology has its tiny but significant

part to play in all this. However depressing current trends may be, I have a deep confidence in the ultimate realisation of humanity. Although shadowed now in somewhat ludicrous individualism resulting in inadequate, misleading and divisive forms of association or ego-collectives, do we not have glimpses of true connection between individuating beings, enabling the exchange of love and an empathetic sense of the underlying affinity of all beings in the universe? No matter if the fulfilment of what it means to be a human being takes eons, all the seeds and intimations are discernable, although not yet sustainable. May we hold faith and do our bit. 🌱



Jill Hall was born in South Africa into an environment of extreme inequality and oppression, and cannot remember a time when she was not disturbed, puzzled and fascinated about what it means to be a human being. She moved to London in her late teens, working as an actress until becoming a mother and philosophy student. Attracted to the arena of self-development in the early days of Humanistic Psychology, she later became a tutor at the Institute of Biodynamic Psychology. She now runs weekend residential groups and has been a guest lecturer for various professional bodies and universities. She is the author of *The Reluctant Adult*.

Notes and References

1. I ponder on the notion that this is what is meant by the 'forgiveness of sins' revealed by the multi-consciousness realised in the person called Jesus.
2. It is telling that Microloan, who lends small sums to people to establish small enterprises to sustain themselves, truly does lead to growth. And being person-centred, 99% of the loans are repaid.
3. Our success is reflected in the 2002 report by The Royal College of Psychiatrists: 'Strict adherence to guidelines, for fear of risk, should not be allowed to stifle responsible innovative practice or the patient's choice of alternative therapeutic solutions to the same problem.'

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