How the Outside Comes Inside: Ecological Selves in the Therapy Room

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SYNOPSIS

The spread of various outdoor therapy practices implies a validation of the human connection to other-than-human life by many in the profession. However, this connection can actually arise in the indoor therapy space and be just as significant. This is illustrated by case histories from both the early and more recent history of therapy, and can arise in many ways. Examples are drawn from Jung, Case and Sacks. They lend support to the theory that human mutuality with other life can be a major feature of the unconscious. Various writers have argued this, but therapist attitude has a crucial effect on whether it features in a particular therapy. I give a range of examples from my own practice, of the ways in which this can appear in both content and process. These include the importance of animals and the outdoors in biography and in the search for well-being, the need to explore ecological anxiety, and geographical affinity. The intervention of other creatures, or the elements, into the unfolding of sessions is described to illustrate process. Issues of boundaries and correct practice are examined. In conclusion, I suggest that the absence of these aspects from therapy can be symptomatic of an underlying cultural alienation from other life which we are challenged to heal.

Introduction: Thinking about Human and Other

The commitment which some practitioners have made to counselling and coaching in outdoor settings marks a significant impulse within the therapy profession: *an emphatic validation of the reciprocal human relationship with other-than-human life*. The Counsellors and Psychotherapists Outdoors website exemplifies this, as does the work of individuals such as Geoffrey MacMullan in the addictions field, who works largely outdoors. The rapid spread of equine-assisted therapy, which has earned considerable media attention (e.g. McVeigh, 2012), is another sign of the same. However, there are a variety of ways in which this relationship between human and other can permeate the indoor setting, where most therapists still work – *if the therapist allows them to* – and these have at least as much significance. Two provocative and documented examples are Jung's celebrated opening of the therapy room window to bring in a beetle which he handed to his client (Jung, 1971), and the decision analytical therapist Anita Sacks made – and recorded in her 2009 article in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy* – to let her dog into the therapy room to interact with clients. The issues of correct and responsible practice which these choices bring are very

real; yet the question of whether therapists welcome or reject such choices carries even wider cultural implications.

Whereas counselling and psychotherapy have mostly focused on relationships between humans or processes within a human, the argument that the human relationship with nature has major significance for the psyche has a growing number of advocates, many of whom also argue that *this relationship may be largely unconscious*. Recent landmarks include Jerome Bernstein's (2005) studies of clients for whom intimate links with other life were crucial to the unfolding of both their biographies and their therapy, and books by Totton (2011a), Dodds (2009) and Weintrobe (2012). The debate in the pages of *Therapy Today* magazine (March, April 2011), following both Totton's article about his book (2011b), and another by Nicola Banning (Banning, 2012) on equine-assisted therapy, illustrate some of the divisions within the profession on this topic. Detractors argued that, for instance, *protection* against nature was the perennial human need which therapy was also required to support (North, 2011: 40–3), or that the interpretation of horses' responses during equine-assisted work was a misleading inflation of their true meaning (Alborough, 2012: 40). However, for its subscribers this work hinges on a fundamental concept: the connection to other life is actually crucial to the meaning of being human, and the conscious experience of this is crucial to human well-being.

The decisive role of contact with nature in emotional and physical health has been substantiated by numerous studies referred to in Peter Kahn (1999) and Louv (2005), and indeed the re-appearance of rickets among British children gives a very physical manifestation of the cost of ignoring this basic human need. Crucial to the debate is the work of David Abram (1996), Jerome Bernstein (2005), Derreck Jensen (2000) and Christian de Quincey (2005). They make a strong case for regarding intimate exchange with other life *as one of the features of the human unconscious*. In other words, alongside the elements of the unconscious which can be awakened in therapy – attachment patterns, sexuality, trauma – is another; a deep and reciprocal intercourse with the animal, plant and elemental realms. As Bernstein points out, Jung once declared that 'the collective unconscious is simply nature' (Bernstein, 2005: 72); while a research interviewee of mine, attempting to put this area of experience into words, said, 'Everything is communicating with us all the time'. While this statement might seem ripe for much qualification from the rational mind, it admirably captures the quality of this experience of reciprocity when it emerges into awareness. Why, then, does this not appear to be a major feature of more case histories? I suspect that one factor might simply be the openness of the therapist to the possibility that it could be, and also whether he has in some way communicated this openness, or not.

Such writers also argue that human divorce from nature is felt as pain, grief or longing by many people in contemporary post-industrial cultures. When unconscious, this contributes to compulsive behaviour such as addiction or consumerism. For some there is a biographical 'moment' of loss alongside the collective one; and also, later in life, a struggle to recover the loss. The need to reconnect, they contend, is widespread, even when unrecognized. Many contemporary humans have deep experiences of connection to other-than-human life at some time in their lives, and many more maintain an unfulfilled capacity for it. But, according to this line of thought, some individuals either marginalize that experience in their lives, or *they* feel marginalized by a society that fails to value such awareness.

Many in the therapy profession believe – with a great deal of scientific support – that our species is hurtling blindly towards a cataclysm very soon, due to a delusion of separateness from nature, and that therapists may be abetting the sleepwalk over the edge. Some perceive widespread grief and fear (Macey, 2007: 8, 9), even if denied or unarticulated.

In the Therapy Room

1. The Need to Connect

An example of such themes arising within a therapy session occurred when I was working with a young man who was feeling dejected and isolated. His statement during the session was, 'Nobody really cares about me...', and when I asked him if this also included me, he responded without hesitation that it did. It seemed that his despondency was total, and the prospect of human contact offered him nothing. Struggling for an appropriate response and doubting that I'd find one, I asked, 'Does anything make you feel good....'. His answer was as hesitant as it was significant: 'My pooch', he replied, 'has been behaving strangely....'. I asked him to say more, and he described how he spent a lot of time just lying on the sofa. His dog, he said, would come and

just stand there quietly looking into his eyes. Then the dog would lie down next to him. 'It's as if she understands what's happening to me', he said.

Listening to this I felt riveted, and also noted his somewhat dismissive tone, as if he expected his statements to be ridiculed. I made a spur-of-the-moment decision, which was to declare my belief, backed up by various authorities, that the emotional range and empathic powers of dogs are greater than might be assumed, and that I thought it likely that the dog actually did have considerable understanding of what he the human was going through. 'I didn't dare believe that....', my client responded. Then, after a pause, he said, with surprise, 'I've just started to feel a bit better....', and indeed, although there were setbacks, he continued to become more buoyant over subsequent weeks. What struck me particularly was his *resistance to his own perceptions* and the way this contributed to his sense of isolation.

Another client responded positively to the challenge I made about his unfulfilling relationship with other life. When he'd once again voiced his persistent regret that he didn't live 'from the heart', I asked about his work as a gardener. I said: 'So the work isn't about engaging in a passionate partnership with the Earth, then?' His reply was, 'No, it's more "move a bush there, put up a fence there..."'.

But this led on to him remembering how much he loved Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* stories, and the way humans and nature are magically connected in those stories. I suggested that it was possible for his life to be more like this, and from then on he consciously began to embrace the possibility. For instance, he devised new promotional literature for his gardening work which reflected this impulse. Much later he told me two things; first, that he hadn't thought therapy was supposed to be about that, and secondly that it was the best bit of the therapy.

One client realized during therapy that her well-being depended on regular walking excursions to woodland, but also that she frequently deprived herself of this in favour of getting a few more tasks ticked off her 'to-do' list. What she required from the therapist, she clearly acknowledged, was a regular reminding that the excursions were a priority, and a challenge as to whether she had made them. In contrast, another client was asked, at initial interview, if she had any other-than-human relationships. 'Yes', she replied, 'a dog, a fish, a rabbit... but you wouldn't want to know about those....'. I was arrested by this apparent assumption that no one would regard these relationships as anything but peripheral. I speculated that a gentle but continuing challenge to this supposition might be appropriate and worthwhile.

One client, with no apparent history of feeling a bond with 'nature', but who was a keen cyclist, on reaching a state of unprecedented health and vigour, suddenly declared, 'I feel attuned to Mother Earth'. When I drew attention to the unusual (for her) style of this statement, she readily acknowledged this, but *also* re-iterated the accuracy of the statement. Another had a long therapy featuring many different issues, and marked by growing fulfilment in many areas of life. But eventually a new thread emerged – a feeling of not being 'at home' in her current location, and of being drawn to a different region of the country and landscape. We recognized the urge to repair an earlier disruption, when she'd been uprooted in childhood. We gave much space to the feeling of sorrow and loss around this uprooting. But the sense of geographical affinity remained strong, and her final decision was to move to the landscape where she felt 'at home'.

2. Ecological Anxiety

Many people now feel intense anxiety about the future of the natural world – a sense that it is under threat. One client related the key moment in his schooling, when a science teacher alerted his teenage pupils to the enormity and diversity of ecological threats confronting the human race. He was deeply impressed, but saw this as the moment when depression became a constant presence in his life, arising out of the mixture of foreboding, frustration and helplessness. Although this man eventually found a way out of the depression, he also voiced a conviction that much of the anxiety and depression which he saw as widespread in society arose from just this perspective; that actually there was a widespread, if unconscious, realization that ecological issues were grave, and many people were deeply affected by this – more deeply than they cared to admit.

3. Letting the Other into the Room

The inclusion of the natural world in the *process* of sessions, as distinct from the *content*, happens in two main ways; when therapists include events taking place just outside the window (e.g. the behaviour of birds); and when they welcome creatures or natural phenomena into the therapy room as extra members of the

partnership. During my research I have been surprised by the number of therapists who seem to do the latter.

Child Psychotherapist Caroline Case (2005) describes moments in which occurrences in the garden, seen through the window of the therapy room, enable the client's process to unfold. For instance, she refers to her child client with severe behavioural difficulties, who suddenly noticed a blackbird through the window. When the therapist observed that the bird was eating berries from the tree, the child emphatically responded, 'It's not their fault!'. This utterance – which might at first seem so unconnected – stimulated a flow of material around survival from mother's hostility.

Jung (1971: 511–12) described the moment when he brought another creature into the therapy room. A client declared a dream featuring a scarab beetle. The session was then interrupted by a tapping at the window. The analyst opened it to discover a 'scarab-like' beetle, which he then handed to his client; this unfreezes the therapy (according to the therapist, at least). Another and fuller example is provided by the detailed and careful description that Anita Sacks gives of her dog's role in sessions, in her 2008 article in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, to which I return later. In both of these cases, there is an inclusion of the other creature which is at first *accidental,* but *also* a spontaneous decision made by the therapist to accept that inclusion.

In both cases the therapists argue that the intervention gives the therapy greater efficacy. In both instances they deviate from the conventional dyad to include another creature as 'co-therapist'. In fact – as I discovered during research – numerous practitioners do this, yet there is relatively little coverage given to it in trainings and the literature. Of course, such instances prompt important questions of correct practice. The therapist has made a decision which the client may not have bargained for, and may find de-stabilizing. In Sacks's example, the therapist has brought into the room a creature with whom she already has a close relationship, thereby triggering a variety of possible transference responses.

Sacks outlined the context and consequences of her decision to allow her dog into the therapy room in considerable detail:

> I was probably lax about remembering to put her (the dog) in the back room, when Jack showed up. Sam (the dog) was there in the waiting room happily receiving him. I saw and heard him say 'I'm glad someone's happy to see me'. I was so struck by his response to her, as he most often showed no positive affect, appearing severely depressed and distressed. I decided to allow Sam to come into the session while I observed further the interaction between him and her. (Sacks, 2008: 509)

"...the dog began to adopt a routine of... following patient and therapist into the room"

She noted that the dog began to adopt a routine of waiting for patients and following patient and therapist into the room. She observed the dog's differing responses to individuals and to immediacy in the sessions: 'On occasion, when he was in great emotional pain and cried, Sam went over and put her paw on him. She recognized the emotional pain and responded to it.' But she (the dog) would also withdraw contact when he indicated, and the responsiveness offered him 'a connective object experience' (ibid.: 510). She believes that this enables the (Winnicottian) True Self to emerge, and that otherwise the analyst can only 'talk to the False Self about the True Self'.

In contrast, with another patient the dog would only withdraw from contact when 'he firmly meant it, and when he wept she did not approach him but let him be'. Another patient was fearful of dogs, and Sam appropriately kept her distance for many weeks but, eventually, the client began to stroke her. She points out that a number of these clients had significant relationships with pets but did not mention them until her dog was present (ibid.: 519), and also speculated that the pet could be 'the most significant family member' and consequently, according to 'analytic wisdom', the one least spoken about in the therapy (ibid.: 520).

Both the benefits of such approaches *and* the disruptive effects warrant careful consideration. Detractors regard welcoming an animal into the room as similar to inviting a therapist's family member into the room, and therefore inappropriate. Subscribers point out

that having a plant in the room, which many therapists do, is already allowing in another being; and indeed, that as we all carry about numerous other organisms, the concept of an individual as a separate entity is a delusion, and other life cannot really be excluded from the therapy room anyway. This debate exemplifies the richness and challenge of the ecopsychological perspective within therapy. It questions the fundamental model of human nature and identity to which therapists adhere when we practise, and whether it is necessarily the only valid one.

One respondent to a research survey I carried out described unequivocally her inclusion of her dog in the therapeutic process in a fashion very similar to that described by Sacks. She explained that she tells all potential new clients that she has a dog, and offers to refer on those clients who don't feel comfortable with that. She notices the way in which the dog enters the therapy room for certain clients, and keeps well away for others. She finds that offering clients the choice of whether to have the dog in the room often provides fertile ground for work – for instance, whether the client actually feels able to say 'No' to their therapist authority figure. She describes a number of ways in which the animal becomes a catalyst. For one client the dog's presence was synchronistic, as another dog had been her childhood best friend:

> Weekly, for two years, she sat on the floor with Jazzy. This generated much therapeutic opportunity, all sorts of issues were explored: touch, affection, safety, friendships, relationships. One challenge was when I commented on how she often brought dog treats: buying love, versus trusting she was lovable anyway – becoming a 'people pleaser' versus finding assertiveness and self esteem....

She adds: 'I have had one client leave after a few sessions, because she couldn't bear the pain of seeing that I had more respect for my dog than her parents had had for her.'

In my own practice, my cat has fulfilled a comparable role. My client N had been telling me in previous sessions about childhood incidents in which her exclusion from groups had been bitterly disappointing, made doubly so by her parents' lack of support; for example, when she had been dropped from a 'top set' at school after another parent had protested their daughter's suitability for that set. One day, soon after N's arrival for her session, my cat came to the door, visible through the frosted glass. He stared straight in, and waited expectantly for the door to be opened. I decided to concur – a gut-level decision based on my recent commitment to such exploration. The cat came straight in. Then he made nose contact with each of us in succession, then he lay down exactly between us, looking comfortable and assured with characteristically feline style. After some time absorbing our silent attention, he simply got up, sprang on to the window sill and waited for the window to be opened so he could depart.

He'd come in with total absence of angst, got what he wanted from us, and with just as little self-doubt or discomfort, he had left when he felt like it. It seemed to me that both of us humans were transfixed by him, and we were very much part of a silent three-way conversation. My client simply said, 'He's done now....'. Only then did she reveal the previous day's experience on her training group. Her fellow students had been choosing peer groups and she had found herself simply unable to ask for entry to a group she liked. She was handicapped by a prior need to be asked in, so that she knew she was wanted, which for her resonated with childhood exclusions like the one referred to earlier. The cat had modelled the antithesis of the position she had adopted the day before. She then commented on the way cats are comforting because of their guiltless choosing of whether to allow contact or not, and their 'coming and going' without anxiety.

Another client of mine was having major difficulties with intimacy. I commented that she must therefore be experiencing that difficulty in the therapy relationship. She said that she wouldn't use that word ('relationship') for *this*. Immediately a fly commenced to buzz around our two heads in a figure of 8. In my perception it was as if the fly was commenting, 'Oh, but this is one'. But I judged that the client also saw it that way, but that also it would be too invasive if I put that into words. Months later she corroborated both these suppositions, but also confided a long-standing affinity with flies.

My client S was feeling a familiar emptiness which afflicts him periodically. He said, 'I have a longing for intimacy... I miss my mum... I miss my dad... I miss G. (his son)... I remember once when I leaned against you... I don't know if that would do it....', but as he spoke sunlight flooded into the room. There was a poignant silence. For me, there was something deeply soft and intimate about the way the sunlight had crept silently in. I struggled with the decision of whether to mention this and how, and then 'took the plunge'. I said: 'I don't know if you're aware the sunshine has crept in as you've been speaking...?'.

'I am', he replied, also softly. I then said, 'I'm reminded that it's possible to be bathed in warmth and to bathe in warmth...', and there followed a few moments of eye contact, which to me felt moving and tender. My client then responded in a low, confiding voice, while circulating his hand around in front of his heart. He said, 'there's a warm glow....'. What gives this particular significance is S's long-standing difficulty, clearly identified earlier in our work, in receiving love.

The Therapist's Dilemma

Two threads recur throughout therapists' narratives about their struggles with these choices. On the one hand, when working more conventionally, a nagging feeling that something is being left out; on the other, a feeling that one might be 'breaking the rules'. Walker (2007) states that as she began to pay close attention to her client's comments about his dog, '(she) felt this was straying from the way (she) was expected to be participating'. This tension may be more widespread. Following a talk I gave on this theme, I also heard a statement from another practitioner that she had felt a strong inclination to bring her dog into sessions, but had not felt able to discuss this with her supervisor. Yet clearly, from the foregoing examples, there is considerable support within the profession for such exploration. Indeed, for many of us, to do otherwise perpetuates a wounding and delusory separation between human and other-than-human life. In these and numerous other examples, the other-than-human contributes to the human's therapy. However, what requires fuller consideration is the possibility that for some people – and perhaps for our shared culture – this reconnection is itself the therapy that is needed, that it recognizes the beinghood of the other creatures, and that it constitutes a profound homecoming into their midst.

Kelvin Hall was immersed for many years in horsemanship and the life of the Gloucestershire countryside, as well as practising as a psychotherapist and storyteller. This led him to pursue the integration of other-than-human life into the theory and practice of therapy. He now writes, presents and facilitates frequently on this theme, and also offers workshops and sessions in equine-assisted process. He was recently awarded emeritus status by Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling, where he leads courses and workshops on the ecological self. His most recent publication is a chapter for *Storytelling for a Greener World* (ed. A. Gersie et al., Karnac Books, 2014).

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