# For David Smail (1938–2014)

## Dorothy Rowe writes:

David Smail was my colleague and my friend. The news of his death was a shock to me. I had not seen David for quite a long time, and I was unlikely to see him again because I had returned permanently to my home town, Sydney, but I was sure that, if I emailed him, he would reply. I also harboured an unrealistic idea which I did not consciously know I held until I heard that he had died. I actually believed that my friends and contemporaries would die in chronological order. David was eight years younger than me, and therefore he would die eight years after me. His death showed me that I was wrong.

I am now 83 and have discovered that, even if you are healthy and active in your eighties as I am, many of your friends and contemporaries are not. You find yourself not only writing condolence letters and attending wakes but having to remind yourself that someone who was part of your world is no longer there. I have returned to Sydney to live, and at present all my diaries are in store along with my books and pictures. However, I found that I did not need my diaries to remind me of what experiences David and I had shared. My memories of him were clear and specific.

Nowadays I take life rather calmly, but 40 years ago I was passionately involved in my work. I had very strong feelings about the way the NHS functioned, and often hindered rather than helped my clients recover. I did not keep my feelings to myself. David would listen to me, not disagreeing with me but helping me by gently reminding me that managers in the NHS did not necessarily see our clients in the way that we saw them. Some managers had no difficulty in understanding that turning against yourself and hating yourself leads directly to the prison of depression, or that an unusual fantasy can lead to unusual behaviour, while some managers could feel very uneasy in the presence of a depressed or psychotic person.

I liked to think that I had considerable affection and compassion for my clients, but at the same time I knew that I wanted to work out the connection between hating yourself and being depressed, and then writing about the connection. As a child I had been the butt of my mother's occasional strange moods and anger, and amongst themselves relatives, particularly my father, would stress the importance of 'not upsetting Ella'; but no one said the word 'depression'. David and I shared an interest in writing, but for him his affection and compassion for his clients came first. Nevertheless, David's books should be required reading for every student studying clinical psychology. All of us know how important it is to be listened to, but the skill of listening, hearing the words behind the words, is a skill that we all have to learn.

## Paul Gordon writes:

It was my very good fortune to come across the name of David Smail at the very start of my involvement with psychotherapy, in 1987 at the Institute of Psychotherapy and Social Studies. His book *Taking Care* was one of the texts we were to be reading in the very first term of my training there. It's an uncompromising book, as clear a statement of what he was about as anything he wrote. 'There is', he said, 'no substitute for taking care, and in the long run, how a society takes care of its individual members is a political, not a therapeutic matter.'

Many years later, when I came to write my own first book on psychotherapy, *Face to Face* (1999), it was to David's publisher, Carol O'Brien of Constable, that I submitted it. As I wrote in the acknowledgements, one couldn't have hoped for a more attuned or sympathetic reader than David Smail, for it was he who supported its publication.

Around the same time, I was pleased when he accepted our invitation to join the Philadelphia Association (PA) as an associate member, when we were being seriously attacked and needed the support of people like him. I was delighted, too, when he agreed to contribute to the book of papers I co-edited for the PA in 2004. In his paper, 'Psychotherapy and the making of subjectivity', David argued that therapy's victory in securing a recognition and certain respect for itself might turn out to be rather empty, particularly if it adopted

an unthinking post-modernist stance and lost, in the process, what was valuable in the enlightenment tradition. Psychotherapy, he said, would be better concerning itself with 'our place in and relations with the world, rather than reinforcing the idea that we somehow create the world' – what he wonderfully called 'magical voluntarism'.

David argued that people's problems were nothing to do with what was going on 'inside' them but were, invariably and inevitably, to do with our being vulnerable bodies, or with 'noxious social influences' which have their origins, most often, far beyond the orbit of our personal lives. Reflecting on his first encounters with those diagnosed as 'mentally ill' in the large asylums, David said, 'Even the most severely disturbed didn't appear ill so much as confused and despairing, beside themselves sometimes with frustration, grief or rage; the less disturbed... were at least profoundly unhappy'. There was, he went on, 'if you bothered to talk to them, not one whose life story did not abound with good reasons for their distress'.

A courageous writer, taking on many deeply held assumptions, he was also an original one. He was well-read, but re-reading him is to be struck by how much thinking he was doing for himself: there was, for him, no easy recourse to others' thinking, little of that common resort, 'As X says' or 'As Y argues'. It's like he kept asking the questions that occurred to him through a lifetime of working with people as a clinical psychologist in the Health Service and, after retirement, as a student counsellor; why are people suffering, and in these ways, what caused this, why do we believe what we believe? And he wrote clearly and without a word of what he called 'professional mumbo-jumbo', although he did have a fondness for diagrams!

We have come, he said, to regard emotional pain and suffering as not just abnormal, but unnatural. Not only that, but we have a right to have it removed, and so we turn to supposed experts. We never think what we feel is normal – almost by definition it's not – and the result is anxiety and shame. 'Post-traumatic stress', for instance, had become a disorder rather than a completely understandable response to a traumatic situation.

When he said it was Margaret Thatcher who taught him to see in all its awfulness what the social environment did in producing human unhappiness and misery, he wasn't being ironic. The 'utter soulless, callous indifference' of those years towards ordinary people made it obvious that what mattered to psychological well-being was not 'responsibility' or 'self reliance' or 'initiative', however these were presented, but 'the provision within society of material resources'. The result? The damaged and derived sought help 'in droves, mostly bemused and blaming themselves for what they saw as their own inadequacies'.

It was because we feel things to be inside us that we look inside, as it were, for the solution to our difficulties, and we are too easily encouraged to do this by many professionals. But this way of thinking is itself a product of culture; culture defines the meaning of experience, and all the evaluations we make of ourselves and each other are shaped by culture. Society, including therapy, has grossly over-stated the extent to which we have power to change – 'we are not in control of the processes of influence in the way that our popular moral understandings imply'.

This view of ourselves was too often encouraged by therapy of whatever schools, which encouraged us to be introspective in unhelpful ways and to look to experts – psychotherapists – for help. His first book under his own name, *Psychotherapy: A Personal Approach*, was a restrained but firm dismantling of the preconceptions of several approaches to therapy. Psychotherapy, David concluded, could *only be a personal undertaking*, by both therapist and patient, involving a highly subtle use of the therapist's subjectivity and experience, to the benefit of the patient, but also of the therapist who should be open to change too, in a genuine encounter with another person.

*Illusion and Anxiety*, published in 1984, is a particular gem, I think, in David's oeuvre. It's a book I've recommended or loaned to people in therapy with me more than any other, because it addresses the common, and often disabling predicament of anxiety, and does so in a way that is, I think, a model of humanity and compassion, but also because it is genuinely freeing. Its chapter titles are revealing – 'The myth of normality', 'The reality of threat', 'Shyness and the self as object' and 'The possibility of undeception'. I love this last with that marvellous new word, so simple yet so apt. It's a fine example of a strong strand of his project, of restoring to people a respect for their own subjectivity, 'to take heed of one's intuitive sensitivity' and, by implication, to challenge the false objectivity that is so prevalent in the culture. Psychotherapy, he said in the book, was one of the few places one could pursue honesty in this respect, without being blamed or disapproved of, and without hurting someone else.

One of the constant strands in his thought was about the singularity of personal experience and trying to get

people to trust what they felt: 'Nobody has been where you have been at the same time you've been there and with the same people.... Only you know what your life has been like.' And yet people still clung tenaciously to ideas of normality – is my response to this situation 'normal', do other people behave like me? I am always being asked these questions, as are others, I imagine. No wonder he called one of the chapters in *How to Survive without Psychotherapy*, 'the tyranny of normality'.

I never really understood why he wasn't better known in the world of psychotherapy, especially given its left-leaning culture. Here was a considered understanding of human unhappiness and suffering in materialist terms. As he said in his contribution to the PA book I mentioned above, he still believed very firmly in something called 'reality'! More than once I encountered the response, 'Oh, isn't he a psychologist?', as though that somehow meant therapists needn't bother with him; he wasn't 'one of us'. And there was probably a fair degree of defensiveness in the face of his blistering attacks on the self-interests and false thinking of the different schools of therapy – he called one of this later books how to survive *without psychotherapy* for a reason.

For him, psychotherapy could be, at best, a form of solidarity, of comfort and encouragement and demystification; at worst, it was itself a form of mystification, blaming people for their own difficulties. Far more therapists, I imagine, were doing just what he said we ought to be doing, than he would allow. But then this is not the stuff of the public world of therapy, of books and papers; it's unglamorous and inevitably private. But he also had reason for his anger, having watched psychotherapy become increasingly respectable and lose its soul in the process.

David's was a unique voice that will be greatly missed, but we have the considerable legacy he left us in his many books. It's right to end with his words: 'Psychological distress is not a problem of the self (however defined) or the person but a problem presented for the person by the world.'

**Paul Gordon** is a psychotherapist working in London. He is the author of *Face to Face: Therapy as Ethics, The Hope of Therapy*, and *An Uneasy Dwelling*, about the Philadelphia Association community households.

### References

Gordon, P. (1998) *Face To Face: Therapy as Ethics*, London: Constable

Gordon, P. and Mayo, R. (eds) (2004) *Between Psychotherapy and Philosophy*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell

Smail, D. (1978) *Psychotherapy: A Personal Approach*, Worthing, Sussex: Littlehampton Book Services

Smail, D. (1984) *Illusion and Reality: The Meaning of Anxiety,* London: J.M. Dent

Smail, D. (1987) *Taking Care: An Alternative to Therapy*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Smail, D. (1998) *How to Survive without Psychotherapy*, London: Constable

## Craig Newnes writes[1]

Aged 76, David Smail died on Sunday 3rd of August this year. As co-ordinating editor of *Clinical Psychology Forum* I put together only three special issues specifically dedicated to individuals whilst still with us – one to Dorothy Rowe, one to John Clements, the other to David. Clinical psychologists queued up to write for all three. David, ever modest, was taken aback when his copy came through the letter-box. By then, he knew how much his work had influenced my roles as writer, editor and Director of Psychological Therapies. Over a whisky in Nottingham we talked a little of how ironic it was that we both emphasized the individual in context, but when it came to putting those we admired on pedestals there was no room for all the other factors involved in that elevation. (To add to the irony I had succeeded him as Chair of the Psychotherapy Section of the British Psychological Society.)

Fluent in French with a rich understanding of philosophers like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, David would have been admirable if he had never entered clinical psychology. He could have continued a promising career as a jazz drummer, if the draw to academia hadn't been so insistent.

He trained at Horton Hospital in Epsom and then at Claybury Hospital in Essex, and entered my life when he came to speak at Leicester University in the late 1970s. He had been the first editor of *the Psychology and Psychotherapy Association Newsletter* after co-founding the PPA with Miller Mair and Don Bannister. The Newsletter became the journal *Changes*, which I was asked to edit in 1988, and which a few years on changed again to the *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy* (JCPCP). Ten years earlier Dorothy Rowe had recommended David's

*Psychotherapy: A Personal Approach (PAPA)*, and some of us in her department became immediate converts. One reading of *PAPA* was that therapists might attend more to what patients were actually saying about their lives, a commitment that required months or years of regular meetings, rather than quick-fire behavioural or psychodynamic constructions. There was something both alarming and humbling about discovering just how many challenges were faced by those in the mental health system. These weren't challenges that therapy could possibly fix.

David was head of clinical psychology services in Nottingham (UK) until 1993 and retired from the NHS in 1998. He held the honorary post of Special Professor in Clinical Psychology, University of Nottingham, from 1979 to 2000. One role at the university was as part of the student counselling service, a position he likened to being an encouraging dad to young people struggling with being away from home and crushed by the expectation to succeed. He gave up his counselling role when he found himself being kept awake on Sunday nights ahead of counselling sessions on Mondays. It was typical, I think, of David that his caring should lead to sleeplessness. Not content with a life of full retirement he continued to write, and was a founder member of the Midlands Psychology Group.

Curiously, in *Forum* and *JCPCP*, I have reviewed all of David's books with the exception of his last: *Power, Interest and Psychology: Elements of a Social Materialist Understanding of Distress* (PCCS Books, 2005). Guy Holmes and I were commissioning editors for the latter. David had left us with pretty much nothing to do. As in public talks, the text was precise, the humour sardonic and the sources broad; Tolstoy and Jung get three references, Foucault six, and Skinner and Thatcher one each (the same number as Hitler, Christ and Toscanini). David was meticulous, too, in his responses to my various book reviews. He would write a few lines, often with a kind of amazement that his work was so lauded. His expressions of thanks were heart-felt and reflected a modesty partly defined by intellectual rigour, and partly by an acknowledgement that the gift of writing, like so much that we are praised for, is a product of dumb luck. In his terms, we are the product of distal forces we have no part in, though we remain responsible for playing the cards we've been dealt.

David's capacity for outrage at the latest governmental oppression matched his compassion for those brought low by that same oppression. To meet with David was to experience a humour – often accompanied by precise Anglo-Saxonisms – that, mixed with political awareness and concern for injustice, left the audience wanting more of the same. He won't be around to offer more himself now; perhaps a few of those he touched will carry the torch.

**Craig Newnes** retired as Director of Psychological Therapies for Shropshire in 2007. He had resigned as Co-ordinating Editor of Clinical Psychology Forum earlier that year. He is a past chair of the BPS Psychotherapy Section. He is editor of *JCPCP* and commissioning editor of the 'Critical Examination' series from PCCS Books. His latest book is *Clinical Psychology: A Critical Examination* (reviewed in the summer issue), and is now available from, PCCS Books. He may be the most unpopular person in his profession.

## Further Reading

*The Treatment of Mental Illness: Science, Faith and the Therapeutic Personality,* University of London Press, 1969

*Psychotherapy: A Personal Approach* [1978], London: Dent, 1982 (revised)

*Illusion and Reality: The Meaning of Anxiety* [1984], London: Constable, 1997 (revised)

*Taking Care: An Alternative to Therapy* [1987], London: Constable, 1998

*The Origins of Unhappiness: A New Understanding of Personal Distress* [1993], London: Constable, 1999 (revised)

*How to Survive without Psychotherapy* [1996], London: Constable, 1998 (revised)

*The Nature of Unhappiness,* London: Robinson, 2001

*Why Therapy Doesn't Work,* London: Robinson, 2001

**Note**

1 *An earlier version of this appreciation appeared in the Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy,* 14 (3), 2014, pp. 209–10. Warm thanks are due to PCCS Books for allowing us to reproduce Craig's piece here.