

# Roll on John

**Ernesto Spinelli**

I'm pretty sure that it must have been during the middle of, or possibly late, 1975 when I first laid eyes on John Rowan. At the time, I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Surrey, and was involved in an ongoing group therapy process for those of us interested in exploring the possibilities and ramifications of Humanistic Psychology. Whether it was through coincidence or invitation, John and a bunch of other practising humanistic therapists turned up one afternoon. They were calling themselves 'The something... something... *Travelling Humanistic Circus*', and they were ready to shake things up. I can't recall any of the numerous exercises with which we were challenged to engage. But here is what I do remember: at some point, John had grabbed hold of my shoulders and was staring silently, eyes blazing like Blake's Tyger, right into me. The weirdness of the experience for me was intensified by its contradictions: on the one hand, he seemed to be standing there stone cold and (e)motionless, while on the other the intensity of his care and concern, both for the task at hand and towards the flabbergasted person in his grip, burned bright.

In many ways, I see that first encounter as a template for our subsequent, ongoing relationship. John's presence and impact upon me has been one wherein the memory of that grip, that stare, has always remained. In turn, it has fuelled a counterpoint desire to embrace and challenge.

I have always related to John as 'one of the greats', a major figure in the profession to be respected and reckoned with. Like other readers of this journal, I am well aware of the significance of his association with British Humanistic Psychology (and what was once upon a time called The Human Potential Movement). Equally, the impact that the publication of his many books, in particular *Ordinary Ecstasy* and *The Reality Game*, has had in elucidating both what Humanistic Psychology and its associated therapies were/are, and what they stood/stand for, is both lasting and of immense significance. At a personal level, I owe a huge debt to John for having written those books. In the early 1980s, as a novice psychology lecturer at an American-International college based in London, I regularly cribbed notes from them in order to enthuse my not-quite captive undergraduate audience.

I am certain that this indebtedness to John's writings is shared by all of us in the therapeutic community; as a whole, they stand as an amazing body of work that expresses the depth and breadth of John's enterprise.

John and I don't always, perhaps not even often, see things eye-to-eye. I remember once, at an early meeting of HIPS (the Humanistic and Integrative Section of the UKCP) that John was Co-Chairing, I ventured to propose that something called 'phenomenological therapy' might join the long list of therapies that fell under the HIPS umbrella. He dismissed the idea, as if it had been by far the most absurd he'd heard all day, with a withering look and swift flick of his 'Tyger's' tail. Equally, however, I also remember his active encouragement, some years later, that I join a British Psychological Society Committee on psychotherapy and 'keep the phenomenological flag flying'.

Examples such as the above make it plain that, over the years, sometimes publicly, sometimes in private, John and I have both agreed and disagreed over many views and ideas. When John reads something that I have written that he either likes or dislikes, he lets me know it. He can be blunt about his disagreements and disappointments but, equally, he has always been magnanimous in his praise of what moves and touches him in positive way. His disarming honesty, no matter what its direction, always rings true. What John has shown me – no, more accurately, what he has *embodied* – time and time again is that divergences of thought and viewpoint need not interfere with feelings and expressions of generosity and open-heartedness towards the other. I hope that John feels this honesty to be reciprocal.

More than all of the above, though, and most important for our profession's all-too-regular tendency to be so serious and po-faced, John, as far as I'm concerned, has always championed a sense of creative playfulness. In my experience, this stance is most obviously, and immediately, discernible in his way of greeting his colleagues and friends. His eyes sparkle, a mischievous – and infectious – little-boy grin begins to spread, revealing the limitations inherent in any attempt to measure age exclusively in chronological terms. The message in his

demeanour is as clear as it is important: *Let's stir that therapeutic pot! Let's open our selves to the mystery which fuels our endeavours! Let's start again and fail again and fail better!* It's not a NICE sort of message, but it is a reminder of what provoked so many of us to take the path we've taken.

On an album full of exquisite ballads and blues, the final track of Bob Dylan's 'Tempest' offers up a delicately beautiful and heart-rending sung tribute to John Lennon. I was reminded of its chorus as I began to write this all-too inadequate contribution in celebration of 'our' John's 90th year as a human being. The chorus goes like this:

Shine your light,  
Move it on,  
You burn so bright,  
Roll on John.

I wish I had the voice to sing it.  
Roll on John. For your being, thanks. ⑤



**Professor Ernesto Spinelli** was Chair of the Society for Existential Analysis between 1993 and 1999, and remains (like John) an active member, contributing regularly to its journal and conferences. Ernesto is Director of ES Associates, an organization dedicated to the advancement of psychotherapy, coaching, facilitation and mediation through specialist seminars and training programmes. A substantially revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of his book, *Practising Existential Therapy: The Relational World*, will be published by Sage in December 2014.

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