

# John Rowan: A Personal Tribute

Jocelyn Chaplin

I first met John in 1969 at the B Now group that he ran from his home in Finchley, North London. It was a comfortable, spacious, tasteful house. The pine kitchen gave a sense of everyday, middle-class, family warmth. But upstairs, in the attic quite another world awaited me. Cushions of many colours covered the floor and it had the air of a magician's cave. Presiding over this transformational space was a Magus figure with twinkly eyes and a pointy beard, speaking enigmatic words with wisdom and humour. It was a place to be our 'true' selves (a concept that John would later often question) with no inhibitions and sometimes brutal honesty. It was a kind of encounter group, and I loved it.

We became friends, and would often meet at alternative, counter-cultural events in still idealistic 1970s London. In those days we believed that by understanding and expressing those 'true' selves we would change society. The little problem of rampant consumer capitalism didn't seem so all-encompassing then. We shared an interest in libertarian non-hierarchical politics, turning up at groups like Alternative Socialism. It was an optimistic time when we hoped that human nature was basically 'good' and it was just those patriarchal, hierarchical social and family structures that messed us and society up. This was one of the foundations of Humanistic Psychology. And John soon became a leading light of this organization.

He always seemed able to balance being a mischievous rebel on the edge of society with solid mainstream credentials. I was too angry and passionate a feminist to manage that. But John always supported my work and, indeed, feminism in general. He was very aware of the depth of our social conditioning, but tried hard on a conscious level to respect women. It was hard, though. Recently he told me that 'We all try really hard not to be patriarchal but sometimes it just comes out!'

In 1986 we happened to meet up at a gathering of humanistic psychologists interested in alternative politics.

John asked me if I would contribute a chapter on Feminist Psychotherapy to a book he and Windy Dryden were editing called *Innovative Therapies in Britain*. I jumped at the opportunity, which then led to a whole book called *Feminist Counselling in Action*, published by Sage in 1989. By then John had published widely. Perhaps his best-known book was *Ordinary Ecstasy* (1976), about Humanistic Psychology in Practice. It shows us how to liberate ourselves from psychological constraints and become free, and not just happy but ecstatic. Now it seems a far cry from all the 21<sup>st</sup> century manuals on happiness/wellbeing. Like all his books, it was written in very down-to-earth, everyday language.

John is a great scholar, and his books and articles always had pages of interesting references. He was also interested in creating diagrams to explain the ideas, and lists to put them in order. But he was equally keen to describe his profound mystical experiences that went beyond mere categories of thought.

In 1988 John asked me to join him in setting up a psychotherapy and counselling training that would combine radical politics with natural spirituality, including goddess/pagan approaches. It was an exciting and innovative project in keeping with our interests at the time. John had just published *The Horned God: Feminism and Men as Wounding and Healing*, a profoundly radical book involving respect for the goddess in her many forms. As he once told me, 'Men are used to thinking of themselves as gods, but for women to think of themselves as goddesses is really new!'. John had played an important role in the men's movement at that time. And in those days it was very supportive of feminism and even of the goddess (for those men interested in spirituality).

We decided to call our training organization 'The Serpent Institute'. The serpent was often associated with goddesses in ancient cultures and also with healing, as on the BMA logo today. It also sheds its skin as a metaphor for transformation, and can live underground

as well as over ground to represent the conscious and the unconscious. The word 'institute' implies something more solid and structured. It was important that we combined excellent professionalism with openness to the spiritual realms. The title brought the mysterious dynamism of the snake together with a more conventional approach to training.

In our training we taught both humanistic and psychodynamic theories and practices, but described ourselves as 'holistic' to include all aspects of the work. An ex-student once told me that it had felt like an oasis in the middle of a therapy world fast becoming more commercial, narrow and straight. To practise what we preached politically, we shared everything in our organizing and lecturing roles. This included the administration, which we were determined not to see as inferior to the teaching or group therapy. There was also a vital experiential component to the course, which was seen to be just as important as the theory. We brought in various alternative practitioners to lead workshops that included Body therapists, Astrologers and Pagan Wiccans. We were even taught meditation by Eckhart Tolle before he became famous.

Sadly, after four inspiring years we had to close the training facility down, though the institute lives on in the 'underground', with short courses and workshops. Perhaps it belonged to an earlier, freer era. In our different ways I think we have both tried to keep alive the thread of the counter-culture radicalism of the 1960s and 70s. Some of John's wonderful Zen-like poetry laments the

loss of those times. We stayed friends, and would often bump into each other at conferences and parties. He always seemed amazingly fit and lively even as he got older, and would always come to my book launches and parties. He has been a loyal friend.

Being with his wife, Sue, has been really important, and I guess grounding. Their house in Chingford combines homely ordinariness with all the books and objects people with such rich intellectual lives would enjoy. John has also pursued his mystical path with diligence and commitment. He meditates every day, and brings the naturally altered states of consciousness he experiences into his work. John has been particularly impressed by Ken Wilber's work on personal and spiritual development, and refers to it widely. But he is always changing and developing, questioning and exploring, so I expect there will be much more to come. ☺



**Jocelyn Chaplin** is a Feminist Psychotherapist in Private Practice in London, UK. She was co-founder in 1998 with John Rowan of the Serpent Institute, for training Psychotherapists and

Counsellors, within a radical political and spiritual framework. It was both Humanistic and Psychodynamic. She has published widely from *Feminist Counselling in Action* (Sage, 1998) to *Deep Equality* (O-books, 2008). Jocelyn is also an Artist, Pagan Priestess and an Anarchist. Her blog is at <http://jocelynochaplin.wordpress.com>

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