

Encountering John Rowan

William West and **Colin Feltham** in conversation

William: During 1992–1995 I was a largely self-funded full-time Ph.D. student in Counselling studying under John McLeod at Keele University. He encouraged me to review books to develop my academic writing and to build up my own library of relevant books. I began to review books for several journals, one of which was *Changes*, who sent me John Rowan's *The Transpersonal: Psychotherapy and Counselling* to review. My review eventually appeared in print in 1996.

My first paragraph of the review is a succinct summary of both the book and John's contribution to our understanding of the transpersonal: 'This is an important, authoritative and well written introduction to the height and depth of transpersonal approaches to therapy. Rowan argues the case for addressing the needs of our spiritual nature in the therapeutic context' (West, 1996: 169). I go on to commend John for explaining and simplifying Ken Wilber's model of human spiritual development, a model that John continues to revisit in helpful ways.

As a reviewer I knew that part of my task was to sound something of a critical note, and I address this in the final paragraph of the review in which I refer to my reactions to John sharing his personal experience as being both *fascinating and annoying!* This captures something about John – his willingness to share his own experiences and understandings without fear of what reactions he might provoke.

Of course I had already come across John. I saw him in action soon after I moved to Notting Hill Gate in 1973 and went to see a community theatre group perform. I think they were called the West London Theatre Group, and the performance was very entertaining and political, and John played a character called Busy Bigness, who was the villain of the show! A few months later, the radical alternatives to psychiatry group called COPE, which I had been instrumental in setting up, invited John to visit. He talked about humanistic therapy and did a brief demonstration with me as client! I do not remember the content, perhaps thankfully, but I do remember how quick and effective it was.

A few years later, having moved up North, I finally joined the AHP, and regularly read John's many contributions

to *Self and Society*. In the early 1990s, my career took an academic turn, and reading and reviewing John's first edition of his transpersonal book was an important moment for me in my Ph.D. studies into therapy and spiritual healing. John's book helped me more fully understand Ken Wilber's theories, and to locate spirituality within humanistic and transpersonal traditions. I had a strong reaction to reading John's book. I was impressed by his scholarship and by his willingness to self-disclose, but occasionally I found his opinions at times a bit truculent, especially where they differed from mine!

Around 2003 I was invited to address a counselling conference at Durham University, as was John. Having him in the audience firing questions at me around spirituality and therapy was something of a challenge, to say the least. It also made clear to me John's mistrust of organized religion, especially Christianity.

More recently, I foolishly agreed to act as examiner for John's Ph.D. by published works. The upside of this experience was the pleasure of studying the second edition of his transpersonal book (Rowan, 2005) and also his book on sub-personalities (Rowan, 1989). I did feel a bit of a fraud/imposter acting as his examiner, especially with his work already published. However, it was an excellent opportunity to explore his thinking in depth, in conversation.

Interestingly I wrote again about John in my 2011 edited book, saying:

John Rowan is a key British humanistic and transpersonal author, theoretician and practitioner. His writings are infused with a deeply transpersonal spiritual perspective, underpinned by a strong and wide-ranging scholarship. He takes the stance (Rowan, 2005) that all therapists should be pursuing their own spiritual development. He has taken Wilber's model of human spiritual development and explored people's experiences of Wilber's levels of consciousness in workshops. In so doing, he has brought Wilber's theory into actual practice in a way that has profound implications for psychotherapy. (West, 2011, 193–4)

I notice how much these 2011 comments overlap with my 1996 comments. I also think that John's pioneering work as a researcher is under-recognized. His work with Peter

Reason in promoting human inquiry (see the articles in this issue – eds), a form of action research, has been overlooked. Their co-edited book (Reason and Rowan, 1981) is a classic, and a fine contribution to modern/postmodern research with, and not on, people.

Collin: I can't be sure but I think my first knowledge of John must have come around 1980 or so. I had already been to Los Angeles to have primal therapy at Janov's Institute in the late 1970s, and I then trained in counselling at Aston University with Windy Dryden and Richard Nelson-Jones. I was impressed by John's *The Reality Game* in 1983, his scholarship, original thinking and commitment being very obvious in it. I also became aware of some of his previous writing on radical humanistic politics. I knew of his early work on sub-personalities via a girlfriend who was studying at the Institute of Psychotherapy and Social Studies in London.

Subsequently to primal therapy, I was naturally curious about John's take on primal integration. I also soon became aware of his interest in the transpersonal, especially so since my twin interest (to primal therapy) had been Jiddu Krishnamurti (and some other associated 'mystical' writers), since the age of 17. I didn't ever know John well – our paths crossing only briefly here and there. In 1991, for example, I ran a series of supervision workshops at Regent's College, and John was one of the chosen presenters. Jocelyn Chaplin was another (also Andrew Samuels, Patrick Casement, Windy Dryden and Brigid Proctor). So I also knew about John's involvement in studying the 'patripsych' (see John's article on 'Patriarchy', this issue – eds). I particularly recall John's fierce outburst at one of the participants in the supervision workshop whom he disagreed with on supervision. Otherwise, I saw John at some conferences, usually in his trademark colourful clothes, and have co-examined with him at a couple of vivas at Metanoia Institute across the years. Thus, my knowledge of John has been more theoretical than personal.

I also knew of John's interest in the work of Al Mahrer, and around 1996 I invited Al over from Ottawa to Sheffield (I was then at Sheffield Hallam University) to do some workshops on experiential psychotherapy. Al was a tireless innovator in psychotherapy, and we corresponded from time to time. I was very sad to hear of his death earlier this year. So in some ways I have had parallel interests with John, but in others my own trajectory has been very different. In line with Krishnamurti's 'truth is a pathless land' speech in Holland 1929, I have never had any sense

of the kind of therapeutic or transpersonal progression John has always spoken of. I have read some Wilber and appreciate the breadth of his learning and mapping of human experience, but I cannot find myself agreeing with Wilber's elaborate schema, or his upward view of human development. It is this mixture of parallel but ultimately distinct interests that I can contribute here. I admire John's scholarship, passion and commitment, but I know myself to be nothing like this, and I am curious about the possible reasons for it.

Why is it that Janov has always been adamant that primal therapy does not lead to any sort of religious interest or spiritual consciousness, yet for John and some others, primal integration leads to transpersonal consciousness? (The same can be said of Freud and his critique of religion, versus Jung's immersion in various forms of spirituality.) Primal therapy was a huge experience for me at the time, but it didn't take hold in me, and didn't lead anywhere. Indeed, it failed, not only in my case but for many others (see www.debunkingprimaltherapy.com). And why is it that the initial experiences of altered consciousness I had on reading Krishnamurti came only in snatches, and faded to nothing over the years? In other words, while for John his transformations have been cumulative, my own have been nothing of the sort. I believe the answers, if there are any, probably lie in deep personality differences that we have yet to understand.

I know quite a few of the major contributors to the British therapy and growth world, but John is unusual in his passion, in his dedication to experiential discovery and his fiery and charismatic personality (as I see it). Also, he has largely steered clear, very wisely, of immersion in the academic world. I was and have always been quite shy, tentative, academic (at least, for some years) and not spiritual. Are people like John very different in their personalities from most others (even those in the therapy world)? Are they products of advanced karma? What are we to make of our epistemological divergences? These questions seem important to me, yet we don't really know how to take them further.

William: I have a lot of time for transpersonal approaches, especially Ken Wilber's writings and John Rowan's too, and I do regularly have altered states that I regard as spiritual and which change me for the better (I claim!); but that does not lead me into the transpersonal camp, nor does it necessarily make me religious, although I have hung out with Quakers for most of the last 20 years. So I guess I remain a seeker, and the human scientist in me provides a

useful questioning of my experiences, and what I make of them. What interests me for trainers and therapists is how we can support our clients journeying with regard to spirituality. And I sense, Colin, that despite your scepticism, you would facilitate this in a client?

Colin: William, I'm taking as an excellent summary of John's work his recent chapter on transpersonal therapy (Rowan, 2014). In this he acknowledges that the transpersonal is a minority group interest demanding long-term therapy, and my impression is that those interested in it deliberately make their way towards people like John and you. I think the majority of clients are looking for quite 'concrete' help. I'm not seeing clients any longer, but I can see a potential objection here that if practitioners are not alert to and trained in the transpersonal, they may miss the opportunity to respond fully to clients who are ready for transpersonal development. I would certainly not belittle or dismiss transpersonal inclinations in clients, and I think the person-centred core conditions are capable of facilitating some transpersonal work (as it has been with Brian Thorne before he retired), but referral to people like John might now work out better.

But we can't easily dismiss certain related questions, such as Freud's views on religion ('oceanic feeling' and 'illusion'), and how these still inform much psychoanalytic thinking and practice; John's own view that the transpersonal is neither religion nor 'New Age' – and yet for millions of mystically inclined members of religions, there is a huge overlap with the transpersonal; the problem of a perceived hierarchy of consciousness at the heart of John's transpersonal schema, which he mentions himself (Rowan, 2014: 515). He mentions Wilber using theosophy as a source, and yet Krishnamurti famously denounced his own theosophical grooming as a spiritual leader according to the theosophical, hierarchical map of consciousness.

Lastly, John rather cursorily dismisses criticisms of the transpersonal (also on p. 515) without considering the problems of dependency on charismatic gurus and therapy practitioners; the problem of possible self-deception; and the (perceived at least) problematic overlaps between the transpersonal and non-traditional healing methods, including voodoo (Moodley and West, 2005). Of course John is immersed in and completely committed to the transpersonal, and this probably gives him an unusual energy, but I think it behoves some of us to raise intellectually searching questions, even if they risk the appearance of churlishness, which is not my intention.

William: So without being in the transpersonal, or indeed religious camp, you, Colin, like any other well-versed therapist, can be facilitative and respectful of clients exploring their spirituality. I think that John's work, especially his writings, are a valuable training resource for all therapists.

Colin: I agree. I'm very glad John has had the knowledge, energy and force of character to promote these non-mainstream ideas and practices, especially at a time when CBT, for example, is far too uncritically in the ascendant. The title 'Father of Humanistic Psychology in the UK' certainly fits John quite accurately, and could well be extended to include the transpersonal. **S**

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