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ROOTS AND HISTORY OF HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

The roots of Humanistic Psychology

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The author shares her excitement on first encountering humanistic psychology approaches in the early 1970s – a breakthrough into a new world of experience. A considered critique follows, while accentuating the liberation of the non-victim culture of that period. The author goes on to elucidate her appreciation of the training she undertook with Gerda Boyesen, with its emphasis on a respectful handling of our varying modes of defence, enabling access to our primary or natural vitality. It was this approach that led gradually to reconnection with the spiritual dimension of life that had sustained the author as a child. She concludes with an account of the growth of humanistic psychology in Norwich (UK), fortuitously arriving there at the same time as Brian Thorne in 1974.

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When I was invited to write about my experiences of the 1970s, I felt some reluctance. I have a wariness around attempting to describe, especially in writing, a period in the past marked by such an upsurge of experimental daring. It can distort that past, and it is a past I value and want to honour.

Not long ago one of my brothers wished to respond to a request from his sons to write an account of his life. He decided to include an extremely formative and highly personal period in both our lives – one that instigated our close relationship. He wanted my feedback. I replied that I couldn't recognise myself in what he had written and so suggested that we talk about it when we next met. It took a long evening of unfolding dialogue, resulting in him eventually putting aside his pen and paper as he sat back and listened to me in a way that neither of us had experienced before. He was silent, and then said, 'I think perhaps I know you for the first time'. He decided not to attempt to write anything about the subject he had had in mind.

So I am wary of offering an account of my experience of the 1970s other than what I have already shared in my piece in this journal on 'The Future of Humanistic Psychology' (Hall, 2013). (I have a hunch, anyway, that other colleagues and fellow participants of those early days will make a far better job of it than I ever could.) I am so grateful to have participated in that surge of exploration and have no regrets that I threw myself into it so wholeheartedly. It is a past that not only bore rich fruits at the time, for myself and so many others, but also held the seeds of its own transcendence. If this is not appreciated, there is a danger that misinterpretation and

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inappropriate reaction could result instead. Fear latches on to what has not been personally experienced and assimilated, and contraction can take the place of a more informed and creative unfolding.

So I find myself caught in an unfamiliar reticence while also not wanting to sidestep the important question: how can the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) draw from its roots and be a beacon for the future, rather than becoming diluted or overwhelmed by being caught up in the current climate that seems to associate maturity, and taking responsibility, with modes of control and regulation? The wisdom born of maturity has more to do with letting go than with contraction. Maturity calls on subtler, more informed and integrated modes of exploration, no less daring or courageous, but drawing on hard-learned lived experience laced with ever-vigilant humility.

Humility is the handmaid of confidence and of a fluid clarity – a lack of either set answers or clever justification, which can be the mask of maturity. Humility waters the confidence of 'not knowing', which itself allows the space for fresh new learning, which in turn can surrender its hold so that a deeper knowing can emerge. And this process is ceaseless. Humility allows us to garner from the rich harvest of insight born not only of new growth but equally from the direct experience of having *lived* past flaws and failures. These are invaluable and unavoidable teachers that lie at the centre of all evolutionary advancement. We must be willing to *live* our explorations and insights, tap and call forth afresh from our collective reservoir of past experience, or we can never know what new failures or limitations invite or require transcendence.

I had no idea or intention of becoming a therapist before stumbling into an extensive personal exploration offered by the burgeoning growth movement of the 1970s. I was a lover of the mind (as opposed to the intellect) and had been pondering on life and existence and thinking my own thoughts ever since childhood. Having been born in South Africa, I hadn't been very drawn to learn from the experience and example of my surrounding environment. However, I was certainly hungry and thirsty for I knew not what in the 1970s, and participated in as many different approaches to personal development as possible – every new leader and innovator flying in from the US as well as home grown and, at times, rashly bold experimenters. Only after having done so – and with absolutely no regrets – did I know that I wanted to focus in depth on the more subtle energy work of Gerda Boyesen.

I will always value what I experienced in those never-to-be-forgotten marathon encounter groups and other 'breakthrough' methods into which I so willingly and enthusiastically threw myself. My focus has not been on what I discarded or let go of, but of integrating the best of each approach I have been offered as a richly based means of direct personal exploration. What was striking was the absence of any notion of being a victim of the highly experimental structures in which we chose to participate. It was accepted that growth could be costly, and self-exploration and expansion of consciousness involved discomfort and risk. We were willing experimenters, and blame was not part of the culture: fertile soil for awakening and affirming the urge towards self-actualisation. However, my introductory experience appeared to me to lack the crucial important sense of loving respect for both our inherent vulnerability and also for our carefully honed modes of defence. I remember thinking that far from building a healthy resilience, some of the

methods and structures we were all encouraged, expected, to embrace could even in some cases elicit a cut-off from feeling, and escape into emotionalism, or flight from the physical plane. Defence mechanisms are an intrinsic part of our journey as human beings and need to be recognised, accepted and invited to ease, as we learn to claim a fuller sense of our being and gain a more resilient and creative way of exploring who we are and how to be in the world. I feared that some of the exercises offered with such daring and conviction in the 1970s could even increase defensiveness or invite new modes of avoidance or denial. I remember thinking that it certainly could take unusual courage or else plain terror to stand alone and not participate in certain structures. 'Opting out' did not go down too well; it was not, for the most part, seen as a valid or responsible choice. And there were some casualties. However, neither are such occurrences eliminated by attitudes of caution or fear. Life cannot be contained in artificial 'packaged' safety. Such an attitude violates our very nature as human beings. Safety lies, rather, in intuiting the unique quality of being of each person and respecting that. It is not a generalised commodity. The crucial safeguard is not only the self-knowledge and self-acceptance of the practitioner but a prevailing presence of attentive interest and love. That alone redeems mistakes and opens up unlooked for resolution.

I had just completed a one-year intensive course in bioenergetics with Nadine Scott when I discovered Gerda. The course had included guest visiting leaders such as Stanley Kellerman, John Pierrakos and others, as well as leaders from approaches such as Gestalt (Marty Fromm), Psychosynthesis (Diana Becchetti-Whitmore) and Encounter (Denny Euson). It was enormously valuable and illuminating to work for a year with the same group of committed participants in these varying ways. We were about 18 in number, from diverse backgrounds, countries and cultures.

There was a lot about 'breakthroughs' in the general mindset and the stress exercises so central to the fundamental approach, bioenergetics, were an agonising ordeal – and intended to be! It was all about breaking through our defences, understood as 'body armour', in order to facilitate a greater sense of empowerment, well-being and freedom. We would all scream out in agony during many of these, and this did aid some sense of release. However, I became aware – in both myself and others – that 'breakthroughs' could sometimes achieve an immediate alteration in our body armour, but that this tended to remobilise and require further breakdown processes; the armour was under threat and, not surprisingly, had a natural tendency to repair itself. It had been evolved as a defence for good reason, as a necessary protection during a period of confused vulnerability to both actual and perceived threat early in life, and its original job of evolving in order to protect the child in us was morphing into protecting *itself*. This is tragic when in fact the system of defence was already outdated, and needed to be encouraged to ease rather than retrench itself.

So I began to wonder whether the actual ordeal elicited by the method could, in effect, reinforce the defence system and keep it in good order. Release through access to another level of being was required, a shift to a more potent aspect of our many-layered organism, and some of the work we were offered did encourage just that. Although I myself was fortunate with my apparent breakthrough (most unexpected to Nadine no less than myself) which, about halfway through the course, resulted in powerful waves of rippling movement, the moment I took up the once-agonising stress position, my reservations were not eased. I sensed it was no real

transformation. I enjoyed experiencing no more physical pain, and I must admit I enjoyed the kudos even while disclaiming it as only the *appearance* of breakthrough.

I knew my defences were still operating in some more elusive form, and that I had not accessed real fullness of being. Indeed, I had hardly begun. Much exploration was still needed on both the physical and psycho-spiritual level to enable real integration and thus any significant transformation. I was left with an apprehension of my profound ignorance mixed with insatiable curiosity and the sense of possibility. It was just where I needed to be when I started my training as a therapist.

As mentioned earlier, I will always be grateful for the marathon encounter groups and other breakthrough methods into which I so willingly threw myself. It has meant that I have never felt overwhelmed by explosive outbursts of anger or pain, nor extreme modes of energetic expression in my clients, or among participants in the weekend residential workshops that I have offered since the mid-1970s, and continue to offer today. I know that it also actually enhanced the training I subsequently undertook with the Boyesens and later came to teach, when the Institute of Biodynamic Psychology was founded in the mid-1970s. It is not so much a matter of discarding anything as integrating the best of each approach I have been offered and have myself experienced – not a mixing or diluting of methods so much as choosing what to draw upon, or utilise, for whom at any given moment – following and respecting and inviting forth a further unfolding in the process of each individual in their uniqueness and being and circumstances. And real challenge can be an important aspect of this for some clients once a relationship is well established. But I do believe that an appreciation of both our inherent vulnerability and our resilience is crucial, along with recognition of the complex variety and ingenuity of our carefully honed modes of defence.

It is not only the Boyesen respect of our defences, and the subtle methods devised to invite these to ease and loosen, but also the primacy and potency of the pleasure principle in Gerda's work that so impressed me (which has little to do with narcissism or escape into the pleasurable involving 'in the moment' denial of consequences). It was this, along with her talent for evolving ways to reawaken and draw forth that initial access to pleasurable, libidinous life energy – what she referred to as a state of 'independent well-being'. I associated this with the wondrous and empowering realisation that every single human being throughout the whole of our history on this planet is a unique being – unrepeatable and inherently of value as a contributor to consciousness, whatever disasters befall us or whatever mess we may make of our lives.

Of course our ego patterns are repetitive and unoriginal, for ego is a mere functional construct – albeit a necessary one as a mechanism of delineation within the essential continuity of the universe – but it plays no part in the experience of deep inner well-being as a living organism. I subsequently came to appreciate what a potent and healing aid the acknowledgement and experience of this state of independent well-being could be in helping to dissolve the pull that we all encounter with what I later came to call 'the victim archetype' –such a pervasive, compelling and self-diminishing mind-trap (Hall, 1993). We seldom realise what power we give away to ego. Any work that elicits a state of deep inner well-being – and thus real connection with others – weakens the inappropriate and diverting intrusions of ego, with its fluctuating deflations and inflations. Inappropriate reliance on ego is no

trivial thing. Identifying with a flimsy structure leads to terror of a kind, much agony (even if over what may appear superficial to those more grounded or fortunate to have access to their spiritual resources), and severe distress can result in a sense of panicky emptiness from which it is natural to flee. Ego-driven attitudes and actions can never satisfy, and thus proliferate insecurity, even as security is what is so desired. Drawing on a vegetative level to enable a sound and flexible resilience can gradually enable ego to ease and play its own necessary but limited role of delineation in the embodied soul's journey on earth.

I see the holistic emphasis of the AHP as a crucial perspective in enabling ego to take this limited but necessary place within the whole person. The Boyesen approach not only elicits a sense of nourishment but can lead seamlessly into an experiential reclaiming of the spiritual dimension of life. That was, in fact, my own experience after the diminishing loss of contact with my childhood 'knowings' of soul and spirit. Stripped to what felt like an honest atheism for many years (which felt like a permanent eclipse of the sun), I gradually re-entered a multi-dimensional world through my irrefutable and immediate experience. I have witnessed this emerging in many long-term clients. It is a wonderful privilege to witness. Without it, ego is more likely to usurp its appropriate function.

Gerda devised slow and rhythmic exercises, with the gentlest possible release of breath, lying on the floor and thus both supported and surrendered. Spacious, no direction given or outcome expected. Such times could open one to a sense of being permeable to the action of what human beings have long referred to as the Divine – a sense of being at one with All That Is, recognised as love, and thus held and nourished and sustained at a profound level. This, and other undirected and process-orientated bodywork on mattress and massage table, provided a context for both a sympathetic and innovative approach to our varying modes of defence, embodied in such a variety of ways, as well as facilitating the possibility of access to a deep state of independent well-being. And of course, any real experience of the life-giving flow within us enables us to let go our defences and the limiting and repetitive behaviours they engender. It is not surprising, since the ego has no substance in itself, that this phenomenon is manifesting in the present global promotion of, and dependence on, consumerism, in the name of growth, aided by the manipulation of figures on screens.

Gradually, through this work, recognition of love as the Universal Force from which life on earth emanates began to become more and more real. Along with this can come the sense that it invites us *forward*, through living in the multi-dimensional moment, into greater fullness and realisation of being: the evolutionary magnet of the call of the Future (resonant with the Omega Principle of Teilhard de Chardin). This emphasis on the primacy of love carries with it an understanding of why interruption and denial of such a force can cause such deprivation, havoc and depth of pain in our ignorance and semi-evolved efforts to make our way in the world. As a species we so easily get caught in a self-perpetuating web of reaction. My debt to the 1970s – the decades in which the AHP courageously established its roots – is that it enabled me to be both profoundly hopeful and ruthlessly (and yet compassionately) realistic about life, and thus ourselves, at the same time. Strangely enough, they go hand in hand. So access to multi-dimensional experience is what I rediscovered in the 1970s, reclaiming what had guided and sustained me as a child growing up in such an alien and incomprehensible environment as South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s.

I need to add that I did not establish myself as a biodynamic practitioner in the way I had hoped when I moved to Norwich with my family in 1974. It is hard to imagine now, but outside certain circles in London, the notion of 'energy' was generally pretty dormant, or at best considered a way-out, airy-fairy, vague postulation. Equally puzzling seemed to be the idea that working with the body was a method of psychotherapy. I had no contacts whatsoever, knew no one in the city, and for a time had but one or two clients. I relied on still working in London for part of the week. Luckily, Brian Thorne arrived in Norwich at about the same time, employed to establish a counselling service at the University of East Anglia (UEA), and gathered together a meeting of possible innovators from different walks of life (education, the arts and social work, as well as would-be practitioners in the therapeutic field), which morphed into the Norwich Collective.

The idea was to support each other in promoting various approaches to personal development and well-being in the community. Brian invited me to give a short five-minute talk before an event organised by the new counselling service at UEA. I decided to start by offering encounter groups, as that had been my entry into the journey of personal development. I put out an invitation to meet up at our family home (plus eats) if anyone was interested to hear more. No one was. It was about a year later that I did manage to gather enough participants for such a group. Then people wanted to follow up with individual work – wanted to explore further or go deeper and integrate what came up for them in groups – and from then on I simply became known as a therapist. Very few were interested in my training, or enquired about it.

However, as my clients talked, and during our verbal exchanges, I was sensing their energy and taking note of their mode of physicality – their way of being physical in the world – their breathing, body structure, posture, movement (there was always room for them to move if they chose) and tone of voice. It had become second nature to do so. 'Rooted talking' was a phrase of Gerda's that had always resonated with me. In the end it boils down to engagement in relationship, drawing on the whole of who we are, noting what is missing, and following and responding to the level at which the client is open to connection. I've had clients who found speaking somewhat of an ordeal, if not virtually impossible, and yet bodywork was even more daunting and out of reach. I have had to intuit from eye contact and my energetic sense of them in order to read their quality of being, risking gently offering the words they could not access but which their eyes affirmed, until they could find words of their own. I see this as an application of the biodynamic approach: that trust and sensing of the original being that we each are and respect for the pain and fear that fuel our particular defences and subsequent blocking of the fullness of who we can become.

Later, with Gerda's blessing, I left teaching at the Boyesen Centre in London to set up my own practice in Norwich. I found it hard to leave our London world. As I mentioned earlier, no one I met there had any concept of 'energy' or what 'bodywork' had to do with therapy. Norwich is now overflowing with therapists, counsellors and other alternative practitioners of all kinds. Human potential came to flourish here, and Norwich continues to be a city conducive to creative opportunity. It is a good size and has the vibes of the mystic Julian of Norwich and her inspired vision that 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be

well'. I resonate with that, given that our universe still offers aeons of time ahead in which to actualise our evolution into fully realised beings.

However unwisely we handle our response to our costly impact on the planet, when our feet land again on the ground there will always be some areas of the world that are habitable. We get intimations even now, marvellous gifts in themselves, though we are still collectively not much further on than integrating our egos with our personality modality – a final desperate flourish reflected in the present dogma of economic growth, based on the short-sighted effort to promote consumerism by borrowing credit from anywhere, nothing and nowhere. But when our feet come to land again on the ground, as they surely will, as that is our design – when the balloons of hot air all burst, I expect we will come to our senses and make something of more substance out of being present on this earth. Fortunately, we are each at core a vehicle of spirit, and thus I hold an irrepressible hope that the values and vision inspired by humanistic psychology over recent decades shall prevail.

Notes on contributor

Jill Hall was born in South Africa into an environment of extreme inequality and oppression, and cannot remember a time when she was not disturbed, puzzled and fascinated by what it means to be a human being. She moved to London in her late teens, working as an actress until becoming a mother and philosophy student. Attracted to the arena of self-development in the early days of humanistic psychology, she later became a tutor at the Institute of Biodynamic Psychology. She now runs weekend residential groups and has been a guest lecturer for various professional bodies and universities. She is the author of *The Reluctant Adult: An Exploration of Choice* (Prism Press, 1993).

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