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What impact does working outdoors have on the therapeutic relationship? An interview with ecotherapist David Key

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Introduction

I undertook this interview in March 2014 as part of my research into the impact that working outdoors has on the therapeutic relationship (Harris, 2014). Although David and I have edited the original transcript to clarify key points and manage the word limit, it remains largely unchanged. Of the four interviews I undertook, this was the most philosophical, and illustrates the main themes identified in my research especially clearly. On a reflexive note, I found it quite difficult to identify a particular 'frame' for David's discourse during the analysis stage of my research. I later realized why: his worldview is so close to my own that it seemed transparent.

David draws on a range of therapeutic approaches. While the person-centred approach was an early influence, he also draws on the mythopoetic framework of C. G. Jung and James Hillman, transactional analysis, transpersonal approaches, Gestalt therapy and group theory. All this is grounded in an underlying theory, drawn from Deep Ecology, about the ecological self. David works mostly outdoors with groups of between seven and twelve people. He began working in outdoor developmental adult education in 1997 and started practising as a therapist in 2003.

The interview

Adrian: *How do you understand the therapeutic relationship?*

The therapeutic relationship is about turning up in a particular context, and for me there's a question about my archetypal intent when entering into that relationship. So the intentionality is a really important part of it. It's first and foremost about doing no harm – that kind of *ahimsa* drawn from the idea of non-violence. I'm not talking about avoiding difficulty or tension but about an overall compassion. That's really important to me. There's also something about creating a crucible for something to happen without being the centre of it. That's related to Heidegger's work about creating a clearing ('*leitung*'). It involves opening up space and then open-heartedly stepping into that space with someone else, or with a group of people. There needs to be a level of presence that's helpful to that process. So enough of a nucleus to create a gravitational pull, which is me being me in that group and holding whatever it is I need to hold. But that has to be offset with a really strong

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letting go; some people feel overpowered if the presence of a therapist or facilitator is too strong. There's a dialogue there for me about that, which is often at the very forefront of my mind when I'm working. I draw a lot from Rogerian ideas about the therapeutic relationship, around congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard. I think that was the first bit of psyche theory I ever heard. That was years ago, and I remember thinking, 'That's how I need to work with this. That's a good model for me'. Where that stops being useful is where it comes up hard against the idea of the self; the Rogerian approach starts to look weaker when I think of the individual being encased in skin.

So that's the theory. It's interesting isn't it? There's a question about the process and then there's a question about the model or the form. The two are quite different, really.

Adrian: *It sounds like the Rogerian frame works fine until you get to the idea of the self, and then the way that you work doesn't really fit.*

Yeah, and I find that other things start to come in. For example, let's say someone had an experience along the coast somewhere. They've had an experience with an animal, and that takes them into some kind of mythological journey, or some archetypal imagery starts to emerge. At that point I'm still trying to be empathic, congruent and honest, and I'm still holding this person, so there are qualities of process there that you could say are Rogerian. But equally, the Rogerian framework can't hold the fact that someone has just experienced themselves becoming a red deer. I have to move in my own mind, to follow them to a different state of consciousness – really a different form, a different type of reality – in order to explore that experience.

Adrian: *What does that do to the therapeutic relationship? I imagine it complicates things, but does it? Maybe it doesn't.*

[Laughs]. I think it does both. Let's take an example from working up in north-west Scotland. Let's imagine we're in the second half of the week when people are really comfortable with the environment. They've been doing some practices, going out onto the land, spending time alone, working with the whole group, in small groups and one-to-one, both indoors and outdoors. They trust the process and something really major comes up. Let's say they've had a dream, or they wake up in the morning and there's a huge thing going on about a bereavement or something like that. In a normal situation you'd go into a room one-to-one and you'd start to explore that. But what happens in this example is that they get up early, go out onto the beach and spend a couple of hours there, alone. When they come back they want to have a chat, and it turns out that they've got a story to tell about what happened on the beach which has been incredibly helpful to their particular issue.

A situation arises where as therapist I'm very much secondary, tertiary perhaps, even, to the primary process, which is being facilitated by the place, not by me. When you get into that territory, the question about therapeutic relationship is: how do we as human beings even conceptualize the therapeutic relationship that the land or the sea offers us? Because we're *not* land or sea, we can't. [Laughs] It's stunningly vast; it's overwhelming, in fact. I've experienced this immense feeling coming

apparently from a relationship that most modalities of therapy – psychotherapy, anyway – don't even see. They think it's all contained within the word, as Lacan put it.

Adrian: *It sounds like people are having a therapeutic relationship with the natural world when you're not around.*

[Laughs]. Yeah! There's something about bringing a few things together in time and space and then slowly withdrawing. For example, as the facilitator I might set up a residential programme and people may come on it. As the facilitator or the therapist, I've made that happen: my 'me self' is up front and centre. People arrive and they're waiting to hear what to do next, where they can sleep and what time dinner is. There's a power dynamic where you're in the lead position. I often find there's quite a lot of projection going on then, and that always takes a bit of working through. As the process develops, people get far more comfortable with being outdoors, and they relax. They've worked out what the process is for them. At that point I start to feel very much that I'm like a sheepdog going round and round the edge and just helping to give a general form, but I'm not central. That's the point where the therapeutic relationship has shifted away from me and the client, to me, the client and everything else that is present in that context. When I'm working in the north of Scotland, for example, that context is extremely … present!

Adrian: *We're getting to this idea of a tripartite therapeutic relationship.*

Tripartite: I guess that requires the categorization of what is me and what is the client, and everything else as a single thing. I think rather than tripartite, it's polypartite. We don't have a relationship with nature as an object; there's much more to it than that. We have an experience of ourselves and other people and everything else as part of a massive interconnected web of relationships. I think that's why the client/therapist relationship is quite weird in the kind of work I do – it's weird in that it's not conventional.

Adrian: *It seems like you're pushing the idea of the therapeutic relationship so far that it's starting to fall apart.*

[Laughs]. I know what you mean. In the communities we're both in there's often a discourse about 'connecting to nature'. I understand that phrase, but it always strikes me as quite funny: the idea that we would need to reconnect with something that we already are. It's not about reconnecting with nature at all; it's about remembering that we're part of nature already. It's about making something conscious that currently isn't, rather than changing our physical state. The physical state is as it is. We *are* it, and that's the end of it. It's whether or not we're conscious of that fact that's important. There's a point in this conversation where dualism collapses. When you hit that point, it starts to get really difficult with our language and culture to even describe what we're talking about. Language deconstructs everything. Actually dualism is quite helpful sometimes because it gives us some basic tools to have a conversation with. [Laughs]. Even if it's not adequate. As long as we acknowledge that it's not adequate, then we can use it to have a conversation.

It's like using a kitchen knife to open a bottle of wine: it's not a corkscrew, but it works.

Adrian: *Is that what's going on in our conversation about the therapeutic relationship?*

I think it's a question of cultural contexts. I think the therapeutic relationship in the conventional sense is necessary in our culture. Because we live in a culture where we conceive ourselves as distinct beings, as selves, as part of social systems. We have a structural understanding of the world that might, for example, be completely different for a Hindu or a Maori. We have a completely different sense of self. In our culture the language that's evolved around that is one where we talk about nature and ourselves and other people and otherness, and having relationships with these other beings and people and things, and it can work extremely well. But I think what actually happens when people go out into wild places, the thing that's therapeutic, is something … I don't know, it feels like it almost isn't about relationships, it's almost a Becoming. It's almost like some kind of ontological state emerges that actually goes beyond relationship – where relationship is only the thing that ties the whole together – it's not the whole itself. Relationship is the process, not the product. The 'relationship with nature' idea is useful in our language and culture as a tool, but when you test it out against the universe, it kind of falls apart.

Adrian: *That's quite apparent in your work.*

Yeah. It is. It's very close to the transpersonal field and stuff around psycho-spiritual experience because in our culture, the language that emerges from those kinds of experiences is about Being and Becoming. By going through a process of becoming aware of relationships, you get to a place where 'relationship' as an idea drops away. When people have that kind of experience, they often slip into spiritual language. They talk about the experience of something greater than self. If they've got a particular religious frame of reference, they'll talk about states of grace, of being at one with creation, of experiencing God. But what's important is that the language has shifted away from talking about my psychology, my relationships and how things fit together physically. It's slipped from that into people trying to account for themselves in a way that defies language. So essentially it's a transpersonal/spiritual kind of experience. That's the clue for me whenever we're running a programme; when I hear the language slip into that mode, I know that stuff is happening – I know that there is change afoot. That things are working.

Adrian: *You talked about creating a crucible earlier.*

Right from when I did my first piece of research into all this back in 2002, the metaphor in my mind was that this work is like baking a cake. As the chef you bring together all the ingredients. You select the ingredients, have a recipe and mix it all up. You pour it into the tin and put it in the oven. You've just got to let go of what happens after that. You might come back after an hour to see how it's doing, but basically you lose control at that point and that's exactly what needs to happen. It's a feeling that's always been very strong for me; there's something like a bifurcation point on a graph where there's this shift. There's a point where I let go but don't disappear. If people want me at two o'clock in the morning because they're having

some kind of a crisis, then I'm there like a shot. They know I'm not abandoning them, and yet I'm not really there unless they need me.

Adrian: *I'm curious about the relationship between psyche and matter that you've referred to. We've got someone going out into a natural space and something happens out there; they either find an object or something happens – I won't try to label it – and then they come back to you. To what extent is the therapeutic relationship there in that context?*

There's quite a few different ways of approaching this. I love that example from Jung where he talks about making the shift from seeing a bird fly past and conceptualizing it as the image of the bird inside my mind, which is kind of inside my head. The traditional sense, really: we look up, we see a bird and we construct a meaning around that. Coming from that to thinking that the bird is actually flying through my mind. It's not that psyche is contained within me but that I am contained within psyche, as is everything else. It's one giant psyche. So he says something about giving the bird flying through the air the same significance as a thought that flies through my mind. I think this is what happens when you start to imagine that there is no division between psyche and matter. That's not to absorb the entire physical world into myself, which is obviously completely narcissistic. But as Jung said, it's not even that important whether or not it's true. What's important is that we conceive it that way because the person who thinks that a bird flying through the sky might be rich in meaning will have a much more interesting life than the person who chooses not to. There's something in there about not trying to establish the truth; we don't need to establish an absolute truth about how the world is in order for it to be meaningful.

I'll give you an example. I woke up really early one morning when I was up at Knoydart. I was having a dream about three otters swimming in a pool, in the kelp. It was really clear. I woke up from the dream, looked at my watch and it was six o'clock. I was lying there in bed thinking, 'I wonder if I'll get back to sleep', when I heard somebody move downstairs, and I thought, 'I wonder if somebody is up'. By this time I thought I'd go and have a pee. When I got down there it was my co-facilitator, and I said, 'I've had this amazing dream about these three otters'. And then I saw one of the members of the group walking back to the lodge across the beach, with this massive smile on his face. I thought, 'What's happened to him? Why is he outside at this time in the morning?' He called me onto the decking outside the lodge because he didn't want to wake anybody up. He was very excited. He was a guy from Austria, and in his broken English he explained what he'd seen, and of course he'd seen three otters swimming around in the kelp pool. I dragged him inside and I asked him to tell my colleague because she had been a witness to this process. She wasn't surprised as a Jungian, but the point is that's just a beautiful example of how psyche manifests in the material world, and maybe even vice versa.

That's what I'm talking about; people go out and there's some kind of image from a dream or something that's come up – or sometimes quite strange things keep recurring. A client will do a visualization where they'll meet something completely abstract and then they'll go out on solo, and there it is. There was one woman who was dreaming about her spine because she'd been having back problems. She goes out and sits for a whole day on the beach. When she gets up to leave, she turns round

and there is an entire seal spine lying on the ground behind where she's been sitting. Stuff like that happens constantly every day through these processes. How that makes me feel is that somehow or another, I'm walking through the collective mind of all the people I'm there with. And who knows? We're probably walking through the collective mind of the seals and the otters and the rocks. There is this real feeling of matter and psyche being all part of the same thing. I think that's deeply therapeutic because it allows us to have this incredibly strong experience of an essential kind of oneness to everything, an interconnectedness to reality where everything is suddenly meaningful and we're part of it. We're part of the story, we're not observers separate from it.

Adrian: *This is where relationship gets complicated, because if you are one with the place then you can't have a relationship with it. Does that make sense?*

Yeah. It makes my head hurt thinking about it. In a lot of spiritual traditions there's that idea of Oneness with a capital 'O', which I think is fundamentally important and is probably the primary state of things, but we're not often in that. This is very difficult to conceptualize, but what I'm trying to say is that I love the word 'relationship' and I'm always working with relationships and in relationship, and thinking about it and using that term and designing processes about relationship that seem to be helpful, on the one hand. But on the other hand, there's a feeling that that word is kind of redundant when you get to some kind of primary state of Being. It's not an either/or thing for me. Sometimes it's incredibly useful to think, 'Well, there's a relationship here, and what are its characteristics, and how is it being mediated and negotiated?' I think all that's incredibly helpful as a way of working, but ultimately everything is just in this primary state somewhere underneath it all.

Adrian: *It sounds like you hold those two notions in awareness at once.*

That's a good way of putting it. I've got no idea to what extent which bits are culturally or socially constructed. It doesn't matter in many ways. I don't think there's a right or a wrong answer – I think it's contextual. Sometimes it's helpful to think in terms of relationship and to experience the world in relationship. Sometimes it's only possible to experience the world that way, and at other times it's possible to experience the world without needing that construct.

Adrian: *It sounds like there'll be times when the notion of the therapeutic relationship is useful, and other times when maybe it's not.*

Yeah, I'm wondering, you know. I'm thinking about the role of the shaman, and sometimes as a therapist it feels important that we do distinguish ourselves from that oneness in some way. It's like there's a function there of being slightly outside of that, almost like we give the people we work with something to push off from, something to centre their experience of oneness around, but it's important that we are slightly distinct from it. It pulls into the question the dialogue about boundaries, circles of confidentiality and so on. And working with transference and counter-transference. Sometimes it can be really helpful to work in the transference: you identify with your client's projections in order to allow them to see that it's just projection. It's almost like the therapist sacrifices themselves to the client in that

sense. I'm willing for you to think I'm a complete bastard like your dad in order to allow that illusion to start to slowly dissolve.

Adrian: *So is it a bit like that transference process? It's almost as if the therapist steps into the role of a separate being to help the client to appreciate that there is no such thing.*

Yeah, I like that. I just had a vision of jumping into a pool of water and not being aware of where the surface of the water was until my feet touched the bottom. As soon as your feet touch the bottom, you realize you're upright and you can push off and come back to the surface. Perhaps it's something about the role of the therapist in allowing the client to orientate themselves in that relational field. Yeah, that's more like it. Imagine, for example, I'm going along in my everyday life. You and I understand that as an individual I'm part of this immense web of relationships. But because I'm so far into that immense web of relationships, I've got no idea that I'm part of it. I've no sense of myself in relationship. Then I come up against a relationship. I come up against something that allows me to see all these relationships that I'm in. Suddenly my self-construct changes because I'm no longer this kind of thing moving around, having no idea that I'm in relationship. I become something that realizes I'm in relationship, and that becomes part of my understanding of myself. It's a bit like that. Until you come up against something that puts that relational field into relief, it's very difficult to see that you're in it. Which means you can act like most people act, really. You can behave like relationships don't matter because you don't actually know they're there.

Adrian: *Is that part of your role in the work you're doing?*

It is part of my role to start with, and then I think what happens is that the place, the land and the sea and the sky, start to provide that sense of something to define our relationships by. We start to get a sense that we're in relationship from the rest of nature, not from another person. So again this is where there's that interesting interplay between human as therapist and place as therapist. It feels like the human needs to turn up in the first place to get people there, but then there needs to be a very gentle transitioning across as the land and the sea and the sky start to provide support. It comes back to the crucible; it provides a container, it provides the boundary, the edge of the container to feel up against. And it's not always good. It can often be quite traumatic I think, having that experience.

Adrian: *You describe the natural space forming a crucible. But earlier, when we started, you said that that was your role.*

Yeah, they're both true, I think. Initially the convention is that there's someone facilitating the process, and the focus is on that someone. Then – as I was saying earlier – there's a shift in that role, and I think the process starts to go wrong if the facilitator doesn't allow that shift to happen. It's very important that the crucible for the process shifts from being another human being alone, to it being a group of people and the rest of nature as well. It's nature – including humans – that forms the crucible for the experience. And it's nature which continues to be the crucible for

people's therapeutic process. I think it's very important, too, that this way of Being encourages us to change the way we feel and act towards nature. So ultimately a virtuous circle is created where people and the rest of nature heal each other.

Notes on contributors

Adrian Harris is a psychotherapist, researcher and workshop facilitator. He gained his M.Sc. in Counselling and Psychotherapy in 2014, and recently completed Focusing Oriented Therapist training. Adrian has a Ph.D. in Religious Studies and has published on ecopsychology, embodied knowing and the power of place. His blog, www.bodymindplace.org, explores ecopsychology, embodiment and spirituality.

David Key is an outdoor educator and ecotherapist based in Cornwall. He works mostly outdoors, taking people into wild places as a catalyst for personal and social change. Dave is a fellow of the Centre for Human Ecology, is on the editorial board of several international journals, is Director of Natural Change Limited and is a regular teacher at Schumacher College, Devon. He has also taught at the Universities of Edinburgh, Stirling, Strathclyde, Exeter, Plymouth, Bath and Anglia Ruskin.

Reference

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