

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

On Depressive Realism and humanistic therapy

Dear Editors,

I always seem to have a number of therapists as clients and I also run a monthly support group for therapists. What I have noticed, and which confirms my own experience, is that when we are stuck in avoiding grief, hurt or distress of some sort, there is a defeatedness which comes to the fore. This turns into a nihilistic interpretation of ourselves and the world, which looks very much like Depressive Realism (DR) to me (as themed in the summer issue of *S&S*). Meaning has gone, and any notion of developmental liberation is rejected, often with anger. When the underlying issue has been faced and taken responsibility for and understood, and is able to be held without identification, there is a return to positivity and creativity. This I see as the ‘natural’ stance of human beings, a stance reflecting the fundamental humanistic perspective of people growing towards their inherent goodness.

Therapy, it seems to me, is proof against the DR standpoint. It is the work of whitening away at our insecurity and consequent negativity, which flows from our – inevitable in some form or other – trauma. To me, therapy is effective! It *does* free people from being caught in this unaware mechanically reactive way of living. It does enable people to live increasingly self-aware lives, ever freer from the prison of insidious concerns that insecurity imposes, along with the negativity that defeatedness brings. Therapy is a developmental process, it enables people to live ever closer to the ‘here and now’, which is what gives satisfaction and brings creativity, as well as the deep sense of meaning that emerges from those experiences of ‘being’ alive in this present moment.

In order to experience this rich ‘beingness’ through embodying the here and now, we have to be relatively open and connected in our heart, head and body. In particular, we need to find some freedom from any ‘victim consciousness’ (Hall, 1993) in our heart and head while building a connection with our sensation and breath. It is this open, immediate and present connection to life that is, as I understand it, the core of what people mean by the word ‘spiritual’ when describing their experience. Our heads experience this as Consciousness, our hearts as Love, and our bodies as Energy.

Trauma forces us to split ourselves and separate the connections between our head, heart and body in order to maintain the unawareness of what was too much to bear. This automatically causes insecurity, forcing us to live mechanically (reactively) in just one part of ourselves, be it our thinking, feelings, or bodies. Here we have no ‘presence’ and hardly any choice. As we repair and integrate ourselves, this slowly changes. Gestalt has always been a deeply developmental perspective, understanding the

movement from 'neurosis' to the freedom of living in the flow of the 'Tao' (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951), i.e. in Beingness.

This movement is centrally about changing our relationship to our suffering, through increasingly opening to and bearing what has been unbearable. It is our refusal, denial and defences that keep us trapped in being a victim, with all its compensatory processes. This, as I understand it, is what is at the heart of Christianity. Christ, in accepting his crucifixion, modelled the acceptance of suffering that is essential for our liberation and development, i.e. the process of opening our hearts to compassion and Love.

One of Wilber's (2006) most helpful contributions has been to clarify how we have momentary experiences of 'Beingness' (from 'peak experiences') as temporary connections to 'higher states of consciousness', giving us glimpses of how it is possible to live. This is separate from the slow developmental journey of integrating ourselves towards living every day incrementally more connected to the here and now. This is about working through recognizable 'stages of consciousness', finding ever deeper levels of presence, as we slowly free ourselves from hurt and insecurity through increasing self-awareness.

As Rumi put it, 'Your task is not to seek for Love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it'. This is the deeply humanistic position that Love is what exists underlying our insecurity. Depressive Realism, rather than being 'real', is surely just another defensive structure in the way of our development.

References

- Hall, J. (1993). *The reluctant adult*. Bridport, UK: Prism Press.
- Perls, F. S., Hefferline, R. F., & Goodman, P. (1951). *Gestalt therapy now: Excitement and growth in the human personality*. New York: The Gestalt Journal Press.
- Wilber, K. (2006). *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and post-modern world*. Integral Books.

Jim Robinson

Gestalt psychotherapist (UKCP), Withyham, East Sussex, UK
email: jim@jim-robinson.co.uk