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THE ROOTS AND HISTORY OF HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

'I am a humanistic psychologist'

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I seem to keep praising all that I had, over about 40 years now, of what Humanistic Psychology had to offer my life. My appreciation thermometer constantly rises, thinking back to all that was provided for me, gifted to me, by folk who were more experienced, wiser, had at least *some* answers – folk who had walked the paths that Humanistic Psychology had opened for them before.

One thing that stimulates this deep appreciation is seeing how people around me are functioning – young folk, families, my own extended family, society generally. So many of them are suffering, finding pain and discontent and confusion in their souls, finding life to be a difficult rather than an exciting, joyful journey to be on. Some, the self-righteous ones, are into blaming the world for their woes, are constantly trigger happy with their anger, their criticisms, their judgementalism, not realizing that these cause as much pain to themselves as they do to those at whom they aim their non-loving attacks. Generally, they are not aware of their lack of skill – a word I often ponder about, for 'skill' seems to me to be more about 'wise insight' than about a 'trained mode of behaviour'. It's the old distinction in behaviouristic psychology: do we learn by repetition, or by insight? When skill is based on deep, wise insight, based on real experience rather than on attempts at controlling and manipulating one's own behaviour, it has a much deeper potency.

The others, the folk I see suffering from such lack of skill or wisdom, are also not aware of their regressiveness. In fact, they don't even know what the word means, are not even aware of the fact that most of humanity is still in a childish phase, still needing a worldwide shove to grow up, and thereby to stop causing self-suffering and other-suffering.

Space to experience

When I think of the good-old-bad-old days of the early groups, from about the 1960s – encounter, gestalt, bioenergetics, psychodrama and so on – two thoughts come to mind: first, if there is anything they provided, it was the space to experience. If I were adviser to any young up-and-coming group leader who was unsure of his skill – that is, of his wisdom and insight – she or he can at the least validate themselves on the basis of providing *experience* for their followers or participants.

Hey, to all those leaders whose workshops were wild and full of 'experiences': I love you all, and bless you for the courage of what you created. My second thought, the flip side: I know that many of you were not trained enough in

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psychological theory to always know what you were doing. I also remember cases, very few of them, where you genuinely screwed up – where you were not good for one or two of your group clients. But that is all in the past.

Not having followed what perhaps might have been my natural 'karma' – that is, not having become a group leader myself – I wonder how well I would, or could, provide *experience*, and link it with genuine wise theory, with important *insight*.

Speaking of society's lack of understanding regressiveness, I have to say that the failure of some humanistic psychologists was their dismissal of the insights of psychoanalysis. I came to England from my native South Africa in the hot summer of 1976, with an honours degree in psychology, seeking these things called 'groups' – things like 'encounter', like 'gestalt' – and I had studied some of Carl Rogers and Rollo May. Coming into those encounter groups at Quaesitor, England's main centre at that time for all this humanistic activity, I expected to be sitting around in the group circle, smoking in those days, being allowed to enter the circle centre and 'work' whenever I wanted to, at my own pace. I was shocked, amazed, and I guess delighted, that some of those wild group leaders just created structures that allowed one little place to hide.

If there is one thing I appreciate about those groups, there was an appreciation of the existence of our shadow sides, our 'shit', and the need to somehow deal with it. There was a lot of expression of those mean sides, but generally, I would say, sticking to it, and giving space for healing, no one was particularly hurt, at least not permanently by that. Generally there was healing, reconciliation. As I said, there were a few cases where this did not happen, and I think those people needed more careful handling, and were wounded from these rough experiences.

Oh! I was talking about regression, and psychoanalysis. After about 18 months of endless weekend and ongoing groups, I fell deeply in love with a woman, who let me in but soon rejected me. My encounter now began with psychoanalytic ideas (not with psychoanalytic practice, I might add, which I think can be appalling). Could there really be a relationship between my early relationship with my mother and any woman from whom I may be seeking love, nurturance, the sweet milk of appreciation? So here began my education in psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory – something I am deeply grateful for as an addition to all that humanistic 'experiencing'. Here there were important 'insights' that one had to get to – to realize the way the unconscious works itself out symbolically in our relationships, and how much of its material derives from early childhood experience.

I am also very grateful that the trainings in psychotherapy which I entered at about that time were combining the ideas and practices of Humanistic Psychology with those of the theories of Object Relationships. I was introduced to some of those folk: Winnicott, Guntrip, Klein, Fairbairn, Sullivan and so on. I already had a smattering of R.D. Laing's stuff, knew roughly what phenomenology and existentialism were about, knew the basic distinction between Freud and Jung (and respected both). I had already covered people like Otto Rank, Karen Horney and so forth in my psychology degrees. And, of course, I had read all the basic texts of the humanistic psychologies – which I don't think I have to list here, in this *Self & Society* article.

I think the first training centre, if 'Alzheimer Lite' has not interfered with my memory, was called the IDHP or something like that – the Institute for the Development of Human Potential. We were taught by leaders such as John Rowan and Helen Davis (humanistic, at base), and John Gravelle brought us the psychoanalytic

perspective. It became the Minster Centre, which is still running today (see http://www.minstercentre.org.uk/).

As I said, I arrived in England in the hot summer of 1976. The Americans were celebrating 200 years of having fought off England, their parent country (Oedipal?). I had for two years running failed to get into Clinical Psychology training in South Africa. Luckily I had inherited some money from a hard-working Jewish Lithuanian immigrant to South Africa in the 1920s – my father, who had a terrible death due to lymphatic cancer. I was 31 years old. I went to the British Psychological Society to see if I could possibly find universities where I could apply to do a Clinical Psychology course in England. A lovely white-haired older psychologist was giving me information, and I casually asked him if he knew of a place where I could do these things called 'groups'. He suggested Quaesitor, 187 Walm Lane, Kilburn. 'They give you a jolly good working over there', he said. Great!

My very first group was a Gestalt Therapy group with the famous Marti Fromm, who had come over from America to do that in London. She is known as the woman whom Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, called 'the most important woman in my life'. What happened in that group was totally and utterly different to what I had expected. I did some work in the group, but it was pretty weak stuff. I was 'weak', but I can't say she was particularly brilliant with me, either.

The following weekend, though, was a marathon Encounter group with Mike Wibberley, who was one in a line of specialized encounter group leaders who had come from a line started, I think, by a Rajneeshee called Vereesh (?), who begat Brian Coombe, who trained Mike Wibberley (please forgive me, dear reader, for any inaccuracies). Now that *was* 'experience'! It was also totally and utterly miles removed from what I expected, but it could hardly be described as 'weak'. It was a powerful experience, and the real beginning of the time of my therapy in England.

After the very exhausting marathon group I simply did not have the energy to go back into London central and find myself a cheap B&B to spend the night, and asked if I could sleep in the group room at Quaesitor where the weekend had taken place. I slept on the pillows that night, like a baby. The rest is history.

Next morning, Monday morning, the office workers came in, the boss, David Blagden, and secretaries and administrators like Maureen Yeomans (who later started *Human Potential* magazine) and Margi Robinson (who had also co-led the weekend group). When David Blagden later found out I was 'footloose and fancy free', he told me that soon he would need a housekeeper/cleaner etc. who would stay in the back room at Quaesitor. Wow! The gods were with me. Till the end of 1977, spanning about 18 months, I lived there, and was endlessly in and out of the most amazing variety of growth and development groups. As I said, they served me amazingly well, and I learned so many things, but they had not touched what I would call 'the psychoanalytic layer' in me. That required that I fall in love, and deal with my deep regressiveness, understand the deep wounds of my childhood, in the hungry human search for love and appreciation.

David Blagden and I closed down Quaesitor at the end of 1977. In spite of lots of activity and variety, it simply wasn't making quite enough money. Many smaller centres were spawned from this closing, though. I think the one with the greatest longevity is the Open Centre, still functioning at Old Street, London.

During 1978, we got the sad news that David was lost at sea. He was bringing a yacht he had bought back from the Isle of Man to Blackpool. David had sailed the

Atlantic Ocean, solo, previously, in the smallest vessel ever in the transatlantic yacht race. His boat was called 'Very Willing Griffin', a 'cork' bobbing above the ocean, about 20 feet long. His book *Very Willing Griffin* (Blagden, 1974) tells the fabulous story. His body, plus that of a Dutch female companion, was found three days later. The Weather Bureau people apparently later admitted they had made a mistake and sent him into a storm, instead of telling him to avoid it. We had a ceremony honouring him in London.

When the government changed in South Africa in 1994, and I had by then run the Humanistic Psychology magazine *Human Potential* since 1988, I was drawn to spend more time back there, now that there was a more democratic and less fascistic regime in place thanks to a great man you may have heard of: Nelson Mandela (of course with the help of the African National Congress party, and the people generally). Once there, I found myself being shy, or reluctant for some reason, to say 'I am a humanistic psychologist' because nobody would know what I was talking about. As if I were a fish out of water, not in my own social milieu. A stranger in the land. I felt kind of 'inferior' to people who could easily blurt out, 'I am a doctor', 'I am a secretary', 'I have a business dealing in … ', and so on. Not being able to say anything that would be recognizable by anyone at all, I felt shy and vulnerable, yet also aware of the riches I had derived from all I had participated in and trained in.

That has all changed for a number of reasons, too complex to go into here … but I now make a very strong point, for the sake of the Humanistic Psychology movement, to openly declare, anywhere, any time: 'I am a humanistic psychologist'.

Of course, the reply, even in England, is almost bound to be 'What's that?' My short soundbite reply is generally something like this:

> Well, first it is psychology for us ordinary people, hence not 'clinical', not so much about understanding unusual syndromes in society. Secondly, while in psychoanalysis the main ideas emphasize that the stuff we push down, suppress, is mainly stuff that is unsocial or anti-social, feelings difficult to deal with because they lead to conflict, disharmony or extreme shame and embarrassment. Humanistic Psychology suggests that much of what we repress inside ourselves is good stuff – our strengths, our abilities to really appreciate and love and encourage others, and so on. There is a quotation about this, quite well known, which Nelson Mandela made famous – about how we are more scared about our inner power than our inner weakness. The quote is actually from Marianne Williamson, author of *A Return to Love* and a host of other books.

Or I might tell them that there are basically three schools in psychology: Behaviourism, Psychoanalytic, and what has become known as 3rd-force psychology – Humanistic Psychology.

Whatever I say, and no matter how I say it, I have not one iota of shyness in me about it. I am now a proud representative of all we are in this field, and I very proudly and unashamedly, anywhere, any time, will enter any conversation with 'I am a humanistic psychologist'.

Notes on contributor

Aron Gersh has the unusual honour of having attained his Master's degree in Humanistic Psychology through Antioch University (Yellow Springs, Ohio – though they were in London for about 10 years). He was the cleaner, later secretary, later administrator of Quaesitor, the UK's busiest group centre at the time, taking over *Human Potential* magazine in 1988 and running it for about seven years to December 1995. When the Mandela government came into South Africa in 1994, Aron started spending more and more time there and currently lives in Cape Town nine months of the year, and in London for three summer months. Currently, he is just finishing a book about the psychology of romantic love, entitled *Falling for Love* (see Facebook page), about the Soul Mate illusion, and it will be published as an e-book before the end of 2016.

Reference

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