



## Biographical counselling: attending to experience, awakening to destiny

Margli Matthews

Biographical counsellor, trainer and supervisor in private practice, East Sussex and London, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore what biographical counselling offers to people seeking help with soul distress. It describes some fundamental approaches of biographical counselling, focusing particularly on serving the development of the I/self and affirming the totality of human life as body, soul and spirit. This is elaborated through a consideration of the working of karma and destiny in human biography. Drawing on my clinical experience, I share how this imagination of the human biography deepens the therapeutic relationship and the process of counselling, awakening sensitivity for what is working in the events of our life and the meaning of our individual story in the context of the development of humanity.

In the counselling profession, there is growing attention to the way people live and make meaning rather than on removing symptoms or 'fixing' problems. There is also more openness to the spiritual dimension of life. Nevertheless, with the predominance of scientific materialism and a market-driven view of the soul (in which knowledge is considered as product, and therapy as evidence and outcomes), individual experience, meaning and memory are often devalued. Counsellors, psychotherapists and all who care for the human soul and community life need to wake up to this danger. It asks us to confirm the meaning and dignity of human life and inform the aims and purposes of counselling with a renewed imagination of human becoming.

Biographical counselling arose to meet the growing soul distress in people's lives today. It rests on an imagination of human potential and challenge that inspires a search for meaning, creativity and connection, and that links individual development to a path towards social renewal.

The Training in Biographical Counselling began in 1988 at the Centre for Social Development, an international centre established to further training, research and practice in social life out of anthroposophy. The training was the initiative of Tijn Voors supported by Coenraad van Houten, and grew out of research and study in biography work inspired in the mid-1970s by the Dutch psychologist, psychiatrist, social and curative educator Bernard Lievegoed. Lievegoed thought that biographical conversations should be part of every therapy. In his writings on human development, the rhythms and phases of biography and the crises arising out of the conditions of our

time, he gave a basis for the development of biography work as adult education and for a counselling/psychotherapy out of anthroposophy (Lievegoed, 1985, 1987, 1993). He thought that such an approach needed to be grounded in an understanding of human biography and awareness that people's problems arise in the context of the whole of their biography, not only the pains and wounds experienced in early childhood.

Alongside workshops on biography, another course was developed at the Centre called 'The Helping Conversation'. This arose to meet the requests of people in social therapeutic professions who wanted new skills for meeting and dialogue. It focused on building an understanding of human biography and relationships, and practising attitudes and faculties needed to meet and serve others in their development – skills for *helping conversations*. This course formed the basis for the first training in an anthroposophically orientated counselling that was offered in the UK.

While I was engaged in these initiatives, I was teaching in the Foundation Year at Emerson College, East Sussex, an international centre for adult education based on the work of Rudolf Steiner. During their studies, many students came to me for help with the questions and difficulties in their lives. Their needs moved me to look for further training to be able to meet the range and depth of their questions. I wanted an approach to counselling that could support people in life crisis and take account of the totality of human life, the interweaving of body, soul and spirit. Ultimately, the questions that students brought to me took me on a path to join with others to develop a more extensive training in counselling based on an understanding of the human being out of anthroposophy.

I was a student in the first training that was offered in 1988: 'An Approach to Counselling out of Anthroposophy'. In 1992, together with Anita Charton, I took on the task of directing and carrying the further development of this training. From that time, we worked to establish the course to meet professional standards and to foster ongoing research into the questions: what is anthroposophically orientated counselling/psychotherapy, and what does it offer the wider profession?

We called this approach 'Biographical Counselling', wanting it to be accessible to anyone searching to know and take hold of the challenges of their biography. At its centre, we placed the understanding of biography and the human encounter as a force for both the renewal of the soul and the wider culture. Integral to this is an acknowledgement that in the endeavour to reach through to the truth of our being, healing and development, the social and the therapeutic are closely linked.

Rudolf Steiner called our present time in history the Age of the Consciousness Soul, when 'every human being needs to develop individually ... when this individual development is one of the main aspects of life' (Steiner, 1999, p. 123). The task of this time is to become self-conscious, self-creative individuals, to penetrate all aspects of our being with consciousness and discover who we are as human beings. This asks that we move beyond our sense-based consciousness and know ourselves as spiritual beings. We need to find our freedom, power and dignity out of our own inner activity, and turn our care and attention to the world around us.

This development is won through trials and tragedy. No one's life is simple. Outer securities of the past fall away and the future is uncertain. The inner dimensions of reality break into consciousness and we venture into areas that were previously inaccessible: forgotten

memories, unwanted and powerful feelings and impulses rise and unsettle our daily consciousness. Psychological disturbances and spiritual insights often get confused and mixed up. While these experiences bring conflicts of soul, they also ask us to build new inner strength and vision, to find a ground and centre in ourselves that cannot be shaken. In this process, many people need the help of another, someone who can stand beside them in their struggles at the threshold of this new awakening, and stimulate a will for the future that is not yet there; someone who can be a companion on their search to discover what is a human being.

This is what biographical counselling aims to serve – human becoming at the threshold of a new consciousness. Its attention is on the lighting up of spirit, the development of the 'I' in the soul.

The 'I' is the centre and core of our being. It is *no thing*, both fragile and powerful, the hope and promise of our development on earth. It is connected with the mystery of transformation. It manifests in the activity of will that enables us to make decisions, overcome resistances and remain true to our deepest intentions. It lives in our capacity to remember, to reflect on the past and act out of our reflections in meeting the present and future. It brings self-consciousness and inner grounding.

The 'I' is of the nature of eternity. It links us to the wider spiritual world and the whole evolution of humanity. It makes it possible to receive the past and face the future in an individual way. Time and again throughout our life, it reminds us of our aims and ideals. It calls to us from the future, sounding in spiritual desires, intuitions, dreams and intimations of becoming.

The *I* is wealth in the midst of poverty. It is vital interest when all around are bored. It is hope, when all rational basis for hope is gone. And, finally, it is what we still have left when all else has been taken from us, when nothing comes to us from outside and yet our forces are sufficient to overcome the void. (Lusseyran, 1999, pp. 88–89)

This higher self accompanies us through life and puts us in front of situations for our development. It announces itself in the events and meetings in our life, in accidents, illnesses, things that come from outside and that we often feel are chance, 'not I'. We ask: 'Why is this happening to me?'

We also have a daily sense of self, an inner experience of self within the body, a 'messenger' of our spirit on earth. It manifests in our physical drives and desires, our temperament, constitution and talents, our emotions, inclinations, habits of mind and heart, ways of behaviour. We usually identify with this aspect of our self and feel that it is 'I'.

The dialogue between these two sides of our self, the eternal and earthly, daytime and night-time self, is continual and defines our journey through life. All the cycles and phases of our development reflect and serve this relationship: that we reach up with our personality, our daily self, 'to the furthest possible extent into the region of the ideal' (Steiner, 1979, p. 87).

Biographical counselling works with both aspects of self. It attends to the impact of environment and community and the dynamics of human struggle – the polarities, emotions, thoughts and impulses – while keeping an eye on the higher self with its longings, ideals and intentions. It works with the psychological, social and spiritual. It opens a path to overcome the alienation that separates inner from outer, self from world, 'I' from 'I' so that we are able to live and act ever more out of our true self.

At the basis of biographical counselling is an imagination of the human being as body, soul and spirit, connected to the earth and the heavens, a being in development with past, present and future, where past and future extend beyond our daily consciousness. It includes the reality of karma and reincarnation in human life, that our 'I,' our spiritual individuality, goes through repeated lives on earth and has the potential to take hold of life and be creative.

Taking account of the manifestation of karma and destiny in human life, including both karma *and* psychology, is unique in counselling/psychotherapeutic practice. It works within the approach of biographical counselling as reverence for the mystery of human development and heightened perception of what lives within events and experiences of life. It inspires the understanding that our sorrows and traumas, our conditions of health or illnesses, are not random or meaningless but part of the challenges that we set our self in order to grow. They arise in the context of the whole of our biography and speak of who we are and who we can become, our deepest quest and intentions. And they link us to our communities and the wider social network. In this sense, karma is not just about the past but points to the future; the conditions that we meet in life may be to do with healing and transforming the past and/or preparing new capacities for what we will meet in the future. And karma is not ours alone. We work for and carry each other; our individual destiny is interwoven with the people in our lives, our nation and the development of humanity and the earth.

The following passage from the diary of the young Dutch Jewish woman Etty Hillesum, written in 1941–43, is a moving expression of this:

I feel like a small battlefield, in which the problems, or some of the problems, of our time are being fought out. All one can hope to do is to keep oneself humbly available, to allow oneself to be a battlefield. After all, the problems must be accommodated, have somewhere to struggle and come to rest and we ... must put our inner space at their service ... My heart is a floodgate for the never-ending tide of misery. (Hillesum, 1999, pp. 37–38)

The problems of our time, whether dwindling natural resources, the dislocation in inner cities, famine, terror, the sufferings of war or child soldiers, are not separate from our own soul dramas. The questions and trials that we meet in our individual lives are at the same time the development potential of humanity. This picture fosters an understanding of human life that moves beyond easy models of cause and effect. It embraces paradox and complexity, which are at the centre of human experience. It understands our errors and troubles as meaningful expressions of our unique being and path in life and the interweaving of our destinies.

Biographical counselling aims to serve individual development in the context of the wider suffering of the world, to create a culture of interest and co-operation. It invites clients to understand that they are not alone, and do not work only for themselves. It imbues their particular problems with added meaning and purpose.

This has been a continual reality in my practice. When people come for counselling, the consciousness that they bring to their own life questions often has an immediate effect in the circles of their lives. The environment and people around them mirror their changes. After years of estrangement, a mother rings to say 'I love you'; or someone suddenly stops ringing and a space opens in an oppressive relationship.

At times of major shifts or traumatic events in the world, such as the terror attack in New York in 2001, the nuclear disaster in Fukushima or, more currently, 'Brexit' and the US presidential election, clients often bring these events into their sessions. While opening up new perspectives on their individual concerns, this inevitably expands their awareness, awakening feelings of connection, compassion and the will to be of service.

I have been privileged to experience this in my work with a number of Israeli women who were children of Holocaust survivors. These young women came to counselling in order to face the neglect and abuse that had been passed on to them and was blocking their further development – their trust in themselves and others, and their search for meaning, connection and creative work. We worked on these issues in the light of their biographies and their relationships to family, country and childhood experiences. One client expressed the atmosphere of violence that dominated her early childhood and youth, telling me that 'hitting was the only form of affection'.

As these women worked with their experiences and their feelings of fear, shame and worthlessness, of hurt and anger, they gradually came to see their particular struggle in the context of their family's story, the story of their nation and the twentieth century. This awareness deepened their work on their own life questions and helped them in their effort to find a new dignity and capacity for love. At the same time, this understanding worked back into their families and communities, engendering new possibilities of reconciliation, of love and forgiveness, healing and hope in the circles of their own lives and the wound of the twentieth century.

Biographical counselling works towards social renewal by helping people to read the language of their own life story, knowing that when this is done, a contribution is made to the development of humanity. At the foundation of the biographical approach is understanding and research into the rhythms and cycles of human development, the tasks and challenges, perspectives and possibilities that each phase offers on the journey to awaken to self and world, to discover who I am and what I can contribute. Each phase and turning in life, the meetings, crises and breakthroughs, are all in service of the development and realisation of our 'I', our eternal being that comes again and again to earth out of love for development – our own and that of others – and with each journey has the opportunity to grow beyond its original possibilities.

Biographical counselling holds the archetype of human development together with the awareness that everyone's path in life is different. In the tension between the all-human and the individual way someone lives their life, destiny is revealed. Between the general and the particular is a creative space where we find our freedom and uniqueness. Our personal story gains meaning in the context of the archetype of human biography, and the archetype is unveiled when we see the particular way someone has lived their life.

This imagination of human development living within biographical counselling creates a context for clients to share their story and know that it is held and received. They can come to experience that their life is not something haphazard that happens to them, but a unique and meaningful story that belongs to them, that they have created and intended, including the trials and obstacles.

The therapeutic relationship is central to this process and the primary force for change. When my clients say 'you are my special friend', or 'you are my development mother', they touch the heart of this special relationship. The counsellor is 'the friend' standing beside the client on their path to get in touch with the reality of who they are, creating a

space where both their strengths and wounds can be visible, where their sorrows can be received and their strengths reflected.

It is in and through the relationship between counsellor and client that healing and development takes place. By establishing clear forms and rhythms of meeting and boundaries of time and space, we create a protected, ritualized encounter. The activity of the 'I' is strengthened and consciousness is heightened, providing 'a context for vulnerability and openness to change' (Satir, 1987, p. 25, quoted in Rowan & Jacobs, 2002, p. 58). The spiritual world and beings that care for our destiny become interested in our efforts to understand and become active with us. The client's life starts to speak and move, and the counsellor develops the faculties s/he needs in the process. Something is healed from the past and new discoveries are made. In this process, both client and counsellor develop new understanding and capacities, and what is created through their meeting remains a source for their life and life times, engendering new possibilities of loving and living and the renewal of social life.

In the meeting of client and counsellor, destiny comes into movement – and not just the client's. Both counsellor and client are on a path of development and both grow through their encounter. Clients sometimes say 'I chose you, you did not choose me' ... 'you give me so much ... I give nothing to you'. They ask 'who am I to you?'; 'how do you care for me?' So I am glad when I am able to look with them at the nature of our relationship, and share something of what I have received from them. My clients have been my teachers, my blessing and opportunity. Each one has taught me about my self and the world, brought me my life themes, given me my development tasks. Each has expanded my knowledge of humanity and my capacity to love. Together we practise relationship.

Living with questions of the nature of this relationship – who we are to each other, what we have to do together, what has brought us together in this way and at this time – has been a leitmotif of my practice. To hold an awareness of the karmic nature of this relationship and its healing potential together with an understanding of the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship (e.g. transference and counter-transference) is central to the approach of biographical counselling. Taking account and working with the reality of the free human encounter and the professional relationship, holding both together without resolution, gives potency to the relationship.

The process of biographical counselling engages people in a path of self-education. It is directed less on solving or overcoming problems than on helping someone to see and take responsibility for their life and be able to take a step in their development. Attention is on the client's quest and existential striving to take hold of the reality of life and find and express their humanity.

The process of biographical counselling attends to the past, present and future: the memories and experiences of the past that are working into the present, and the dreams, wishes and longings of what will be that sound from the future and come into the counselling room. Whether in one session or over three years, there are two fundamental gestures of this process: bringing consciousness to biographical events that are hindering development – remembering, seeing what's there, what needs to be faced, what it's possible to do something about; and freeing forces of attention and energy for the present and future – becoming active, making plans, taking steps, growing new faculties.

The biographical counsellor aims to create a safe space where clients can feel seen and heard and can explore their unresolved, unspoken experiences, uncertainties and losses

without judgement, interpretation or analysis. The counsellor as witness encourages the client to be witness to their own story, the anguish, injustices and injuries as well as courage, strengths and achievements. By working consciously with the events of their biography, clients can begin to digest and let go, dissolve stuck places, break the chains and patterns of the past that continue to be recycled. Letting go of the past, they regain it again in a new way and can come in touch with the future potential living within events. Their consciousness of the present expands, and they can begin to meet the future more creatively and responsively.

I worked with a client who had a very difficult time in her early adult life. We spent many sessions reviewing in detail the inner and outer events of this time in her life. She spoke of it, wrote about it and drew it. After sharing her drawing with me, she threw it in the wastebasket, saying that she would like to be able to throw this whole time in her life away, that it was a waste, shameful, a failure, blocking her personal and professional achievement and happiness. She feared that it would happen again, and spent a lot of energy trying to ensure that it didn't. She wanted to prove to herself and to others that she was OK, one of the 'golden people'. She resisted and ran from her suffering.

We often returned to this period of her life. As our work deepened, she gradually came to see this time in the context of her whole biography. She discovered that this dark time in her life held within it the seeds for her future: it had given her the incentive to take on her own development. She realised that she would not have taken many important decisions and steps and would not have achieved what she did if this difficulty had not been in her life. She even came to see and appreciate its beauty and the part of herself that it revealed. So she gradually gained a sense of the totality of her life and saw that it belonged to her. Near the end of our work together, she drew a picture of her biography, which included her vision and intentions for the future. In this drawing, her time of great suffering appeared as a centre-point of her whole life path. Working with her biography, she discovered a sense of herself that was not defined by her past but by her future becoming.

We are not just the players of our lives. We are also the writers or directors of our drama. And we can be the audience. When we practise being the audience, stepping back and looking at our lives as this woman did, we can get in touch with the writer. To contact the writer of our biography is our heart's longing and the deepest task of our time. It opens a path to the spirit and to a sensing of karma. This practice and possibility is fundamental to biographical counselling.

Rudolf Steiner describes this process as 'shelling the ego out of its experiences':

This objectifying of oneself, the freeing of oneself in the present from one's past, this shelling-out of the Ego from its experiences, must be specially striven for ... it is a question of training ourselves in this faculty – through making ourselves objective ... of getting free of events, and of being less haunted at 30 by the impulses of a 10-year-old. Detachment from the past does not mean denial of the past. We gain it in another way again and that is what is so important. (Steiner, 1992, p. 14)

In each event of our life, the whole of our biography is present. Remembering, making detailed pictures of the inner and outer aspects of an event, brings into dialogue and creative interaction the two poles of human experience, soul and spirit, temporal and eternal, daily self and higher self. We experience how our destiny meets us both from within and from without.

Sensitivity to what lives in the events and experiences in life runs through all steps and stages of the process, and in each stage we meet a different understanding of the client's inner and outer reality. This awareness is at the heart of biographical counselling and the inner path of biographical counsellors – that the secret of destiny is revealed within events and experiences. Each is a mystery place where the whole of life is revealed – our past and future, all that we have been and will be, how we are and how we wish to be. When we patiently and persistently gather the phenomena of our experiences, putting out the details, observing what's there without adding anything, without analysis or interpretation, the deeper-lying images and feelings, the essence and meaning living within start to sound. What touches the client, where they want to direct their will, is revealed and their future starts to speak. This gives the ground and substance for the further steps of the process.

In the passage below, a client that I worked with over a number of years captures the essence and meaning of this process.

By giving me, so generously and carefully, the opportunity to stop, to attend to my own experiences in the present and in the past, you enabled me, after so many years of waking up in a wasteland, to return to the future, the living landscape of life I had so happily ridden through in childhood. Our conversations of two years or so halted the mortal disease I was suffering from – of always skipping experience, of refusing to re-member it. As we set about ridding my own garden of what had appeared to be the ineradicable weeds of fear and distrust, you showed me that I could with confidence, if shyly, learn to approach life. The gift you gave me was the ability to begin to love again, to involve myself in reality, and to remain there. The process of healing was therefore able to start. Our work is standing the test of time as I lead my life out of my own resources, able to renew them as I go along. I had been quite ill, but now I am well enough. I look at the events and course of my life so far with gratitude and wonder.

The process of biographical counselling offers clients a path of soul transformation, encouraging them to take hold of the capacity born of the consciousness soul – the ability to stand back and take distance. It is a process of 'shelling the ego' out of the experiences and layers of soul, and going to areas that were not accessible in the past. It invites clients to turn their thinking and observation to these experiences, let their feelings and emotions within speak, and then follow their feelings back to and through earlier biographical events, tracing their origins and coming to know the patterns and effects of the past. The aim is to lift the veil of illusion, let go of old obsessive thoughts, free up the ghosts of the past, and find a path through to meaning, acceptance and forgiveness of self, and of others. This enables clients to move from being victims of life to becoming creators, responsible for the future unfolding of their lives.

Remembering, bringing consciousness and loving interest to the events and experiences of our lives, is at the heart of biographical counselling. It relieves suffering and is essential to the health of the soul, helping us to find a freer relationship to the past, expand our faculties of attention, and listen to the call of the future. It awakens the faculty of imagination, leading us into reality and meaning, reminding us who we are and enabling us to look at the events and the 'course of our lives with gratitude and wonder'. Another client wrote to me at the end of our work together:

I simply feel truly blessed by your attitude of walking me through not only my own psychological overlay from my childhood but through the threshold experiences and 'meetings' that



were accompanying that. To have had a witness through those to help me ask the right questions, to discern a healthy path, and to help me ground myself in the spirit in myself in which I can trust – this all has rayed an everlasting light into my life.

This is a beautiful expression of appreciation of biographical counselling and what it offers. Its wide, multi-levelled view of the human being works into practice not as theory but as deepened faculties of perception and insight. It offers those who come to counselling what most long for: a safe place where they can express the desires of the body and the aspirations of spirit, personal anxieties or world and planetary concerns, emotional turmoil or spiritual experiences, grief, loss, and the delight in a good book. It brings a spiritual psychology into connection with an understanding of the nature and questions of our time, and that we work for each other. It gathers to it the understanding of the rhythms of biographical development and the laws of karma and destiny, and works with people's struggles in the light of their ideals and intentions. Finally, it understands the healing potential of the human encounter, the need for a companion in the struggle, and that the struggle is not about the human being going wrong, but the challenges of our time and the call from the future for the development of new faculties for the realization of our humanity.

### Notes on contributor



**Margli Matthews** is a biographical counsellor, trainer and supervisor with over 30 years of experience in adult education and private practice. A former faculty member of Emerson College, she designed and directed the Training (Diploma Course) in Biographical Counselling for 21 years. Margli practises as a biographical counsellor in Sussex and London, and offers training courses and workshops in many countries throughout the world. She is a contributor to the book *Lifeways* (1983, Hawthorn Press, Gloucestershire) and co-author of *Ariadne's Awakening* (1986, Hawthorn Press, Gloucestershire), a book concerned with a new consciousness of the feminine and masculine principles in our lives.

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