

OBITUARY



Remembering John Heaton (1925–2017)

I dare not write about John's contribution to psychotherapy or his remarkable life. The PA (Philadelphia Association) could not decide to allow me to train with them. They sent me to John, a reserved, cultured English gentleman, who was not so poor in his learning and experience or frightened by complexities that he approached psychotherapy like a technician applying a modality. Clearly, he had invested much in educating himself. He did not accuse me of attacking his family and unborn babies because I criticized psychoanalysis. He was not preoccupied with burrowing into my supposed aggression, sexuality or unconscious. He said he could see no reason why the PA should not take me and that I would be good for it.

Years into my therapy, I met someone socially who had been in therapy with John, who stated, 'John Heaton saved my life!' 'How is he?', John asked when I told him. He seemed to be flourishing. As a therapist, John quietly contributed to the creation of a facilitating environment, was scrupulous about not being intrusive, and was sparing with interpretations.

When I talked to John about how therapy is like partner dancing, he would say, 'That's it! You should teach therapists to dance!' I told John once about one of Rosenfeld's interpretations to his patient who had been ill. Rosenfeld told his patient that the patient had gobbled him, Rosenfeld, up, and this is what gave the patient stomach pains. I thought it was 'a cracker'. John laughed too and said something like, 'Well, I knew Rosenfeld, and let me tell you, he would certainly give you a stomach ache if you swallowed him'.

John knew many important influential figures personally, including Bertrand Russell, Gadamer, Medard Boss and Stanley Cavell. When I met the woman who became my wife, I told John she was an Alexander Technique teacher. He said, 'I had lessons with Mr Alexander'. We spoke about Alexander Technique and Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Both moved our attention from believing and knowing to habitual actions, practices: for Alexander, how we are with ourselves physically and emotionally and our faulty appreciation of what we actually do; for Wittgenstein, our tendency to be so caught up in our picture of what must be so, that we are unable to appreciate what is in front of us and what we do (our habitual actions and faulty appreciation). They encourage us to allow a period of hesitation, a pause, a way of being with oneself and others in which room might be made for something different and creative or at least more in touch with what is unfolding around us.

Towards the end of my therapy I simply said, 'You know, I am quite fond of you John'. His response was, 'And I am quite fond of you'.

I used to run into John on Finchley Road up until about a year before he died. We would stop and talk briefly. I still find myself looking for him there at times.

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