

# Steiner, therapy, he(art): Ensconcing the heart at the centre of ‘beyond-modernity’ therapeutic work<sup>1</sup>

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**Richard House**, Educational Consultant, Stroud, UK

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## Abstract

‘Does psychotherapy need a soul?’, psychotherapist and subsequent spiritual teacher Gill Edwards provocatively asked a quarter century ago as I write (Edwards, 1992). Informed real-world therapeutic practice necessarily involves engaging flexibly and reflexively with the personal, the professional and the political – and for some, it necessarily involves the spiritual, too. How can practitioners honour the core place of the heart in the subtlety and complexity of therapy work, in the face of more utilitarian, professionalizing imperatives and distractions that are always threatening to colonize our work? This article seeks to engage with these complex yet crucial issues, drawing in particular on Rudolf Steiner’s cosmology and the place of an artistic sensibility in all therapy work, not merely ‘art therapy’ per se.

**Keywords:** Anthroposophical Arts Therapy; Rudolf Steiner; Robert Sardello; art; the heart; professionalization; state regulation; Independent Practitioners Network

All genuine art seeks the spirit.... Art is always  
a daughter of the divine.

*Rudolf Steiner*

We become ill for our own development –  
*Rudolf Steiner*

If I create from the heart, nearly everything  
works; if from the head, almost nothing –  
*Marc Chagall*

The heart perceives and feels... it influences

## Introduction

I begin this article with several epigraphic quotations for contemplation, which for me provide a prescient backdrop to my concerns in this paper:

the physiology of our whole body, including the brain – *David Servan-Schreiber*

The central part of our being is the heart.... The heart is the centre of true intelligence, and thinking that operates without this centre can neither apprehend, understand nor develop technologies of the whole... It is a blind assumption that the heart is only physical... The heart is spiritual and physical simultaneously – *Robert Sardello*

Against this epigraphic backdrop, my guiding question for this article is: can, or should, the State regulate what I want to call ‘therapeutic practices of the heart’? The article is divided into three broad sections: the heart; the arts and the place/mission of art; and the controversial question of whether the practice of Anthroposophical Arts Therapy<sup>2</sup> (for example) should be centrally regulated and professionalized.

## The Heart

Many spiritually informed writers have focused on the heart, and seer, philosopher of the spirit and polymath Rudolf Steiner is no exception, having given a number of key lectures on the human heart in his lifetime (1861–1925), and its function within the human being, and in human evolution more generally (see References section). For Steiner, the heart is the organ of the future, and is intimately related to ego, morality, and, of course, love.

Steiner said that it was of ‘untold importance’ that ‘from puberty onwards, *man’s whole activity* becomes inserted, via the astral body, in his etheric heart’<sup>3</sup> (my italics); and ‘the substance of the whole cosmos... is drawn together in [a person’s] heart’, such that ‘in the region of the heart there takes place a union of the cosmos with the earthly realm’ (Steiner, 1922; internet source). In this lecture, Steiner continues that those aspects of the human being of which people are ignorant all relate to the heart, and ‘the moral and the physical run side by side for consciousness today, [and] are found

in real union when we learn to understand all the configurations of the human heart’ (ibid.).

Spiritual psychologist Robert Sardello, *Self & Society* columnist, very much attuned to Steiner’s philosophy, also has much to say about the heart, for example in relation to his work on silence (Sardello, 2008). Like Steiner, Sardello speaks of the heart as an organ of perception, and for him it is through *the immediacy of experience* that revelations about the heart are manifested. Sardello refers to what he calls ‘practices of the heart’ and how they help us to become spiritual creators; and there are clear resonances with the psy therapies when we read that

Within the heart center we learn to listen to others without feeling an urge to respond, to just be a heart-presence with them. Such listening lets others enter and be held within our heart.... It is our capacity to feel the soul-being of another person.

(Sardello, 2008: 100)

This seems to me to be (or it certainly *should* be) a core attribute of anyone practising therapeutically; yet how many of the endless deluge of mainstream books on counselling and psychotherapy ever speak about the heart? – in my experience, very few (for an exception, however, see Duffell, 2018, for a recent engagement with the heart and psychotherapy).

Sardello even refers to ego-consciousness as a mode that is secondary to heartfulness as a mode of human awareness; and with the exception of perhaps some transpersonal therapies, this ‘paradigm of the heart’ is fundamentally different from mainstream therapy approaches – and perhaps explains why Sardello himself publicly relinquished the designation of ‘psychotherapist’ many years ago, and replaced it with terms more akin to ‘spiritual/soul wisdom’.

How does what we might call ‘the paradigm

of the heart' differ from mainstream therapy approaches? This is a big question to which I can only give brief attention here. First, it is an explicitly spiritual approach, which accepts the transpersonal dimension as a real aspect of human experience. Secondly, the heart is often counterposed with the head (or brain), with the head representing the logical and the rational, and the heart representing the emotional, the intuitive and the artistic – what Steiner sometimes referred to as the 'intangible'. Robert Sardello, drawing deeply on Steiner's cosmology, has drawn upon and extended Steiner's indications for working with and through the heart, and doing deep inner work to realize its full potential.

Recent, more enlightened scientific work is also recognizing the role of the heart, and the key relationship between heart and brain that mystics and masters have long recognized, but which modern science is only just beginning to discover and acknowledge (the US-based HeartMath Institute is a notable example – see, for example, Childre et al., 2016). In passing, I would also like to mention the important work of the great post-Cartesian philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty on embodiment (Felder & Robbins, 2011; Bazzano, 2014 and whole issue), as I think there is important future work to be done in bringing Steiner and Merleau-Ponty together. But the point I want to establish here is that from within a Steiner-inspired anthroposophical therapeutic paradigm and praxis, the place of the heart has to be central to both theory and practice – and that this is *real*, and not merely metaphorical or rhetorical.

The following quotation from Robert Valett speaks to this all-too-brief commentary very clearly: 'The human heart feels things the eyes cannot see, and knows what the mind cannot understand'.<sup>4</sup>

## The Arts

Rudolf Steiner also had a great deal to say about the arts, and their role in education and healing, and also in balancing out a highly one-sided technology-saturated human existence (see References for his

key lectures). For Steiner, there was what Virginia Moore calls 'an ineluctable connection between art and the spiritual world' (Moore, 1986, online); and as Meister Eckhart has it, 'In making a work of art, the very inmost self of a person comes into outwardness' (quoted in *ibid.*).

For Steiner, speaking in 1918, 'if we are artists we must find the connection with super-sensible knowledge' (Steiner, 1918, online); for the healing of humankind resides in the quest for spiritual knowledge, and 'all art... seeks to penetrate into that form of true existence which is needed by man if he is to be capable of mastering the great tasks approaching him' (*ibid.*). And then speaking in 1923, 'In everything artistic, there is some relationship to the spiritual'; and 'with the artistic... we place ourselves in the spirit world' (Steiner, 1923, online).

In an important and little-known book appendix by Marlies Rainer on art as a medium for adult learning (Rainer, 1999: 173), she writes of art becoming more and more 'a medium through which processes for human development may be explored'.

## Whence professionalization in all this?

Having referred briefly to the heart and to the place of art, which are both central to the Anthroposophical Arts Therapies (and arguably, more widely, to therapies of a transpersonal orientation), a key issue for the modern, audit-and-accountability obsessed world (Strathern, 2000a, b; King & Moutsou, 2010) is: To what extent is it either possible or appropriate to 'professionalize', and/or externally regulate, therapeutic healing activities such as these?

I know from speaking with Anthroposophical Arts therapists that this has been a very fraught issue for their approach (e.g. in relation to training), with their work being subject to the secular utilitarian world seeking to colonize it and cast their work in its own paradigmatic (and, to them, alien) image (e.g. House, 2003). I maintain that in order for this 'post-modernity' work to retain

its crucial *integrity of heart*, such colonization of the Anthroposophical Arts Therapies needs to be resisted; and there are thankfully precedents from within the more mainstream therapies to support such a position (e.g. House, 2010), especially in relation to challenging the ideologies of accreditation and state regulation.

Also consistent with this perspective is Nick Totton writing on the theme of psychotherapy as a 'spiritual practice' (Totton, 1997a) – by which he means 'an *enlightenment practice*, alongside such other practices as they occur within Buddhism; within Hinduism; within Islam; within Taoism; within Judaism; within Christianity; and in a few other settings' (p. 131, his italics). John Heron, expounding on the theme of 'self-generating (as opposed to state-regulated) practitioner communities' (Heron, 1997), sets out another approach which resonates strongly with the heart values of the Anthroposophical Arts Therapies. I view these respective perspectives offered by Heron and Totton to be entirely consistent with Steiner's cosmology, and to the ethos and praxis of Anthroposophical Arts Therapy.

Regarding the arguments against the state/statutory regulation of the psychological therapies in general (e.g. Mowbray, 1995; House, 2010), Richard Mowbray's view is of key importance. He writes that:

A society needs a healthy fringe... It is where ideas that are ahead of their time will germinate and grow, later to be adopted by the mainstream... [The fringe] must not be absorbed into the mainstream – which would stultify it with 'establishment' thinking and respectability. (Mowbray, 1995: 199)

Mowbray writes of a kind of 'counter-cultural space', in which the human potential movement (and perhaps practices like Anthroposophical Arts Therapy, too)

...must stay on the margin and not be 'absorbed', not be tempted by the carrots of recognition, respectability and financial security into reverting to the mainstream but rather remain – on the 'fringe' – as a source that stimulates, challenges convention and 'draws out' the unrealized potential for 'being' in the members of that society. (ibid.: pp. 198–9)

More should perhaps be said about this notion of 'the fringe'. The very nature of the practice and experience of therapy entails that, arguably, it is vitally important not to close down or prescriptively define what counselling and psychotherapy should be or become, or indeed to fetishize the quest for clarity of identity and definition. According to commentators like Professor Brian Thorne (Leonardi, 2010), an intrinsically indissoluble aspect of therapy at its best is precisely that it is counter-cultural, critical of existing power configurations in society (inter-personal, inter-class and institutional), and difficult if not impossible to pin down and codify, with a fluid and ever-evolving identity whose very mutability is part of what therapy as an *always-becoming cultural practice* is all about (cf. King, 1999; Gordon, 2008; Chisholm & Harrison, 2016). And if being somewhat marginalized relative to mainstream culture because we consciously choose not to engage in the professionalizing power-games (I'm thinking here in particular of CBT – House and Loewenthal, 2008) is the price we have to pay for staying true to core, heart-centred therapy values, then some at least might well say, 'so be it'.

A fringe necessarily does not remain fixed, as the 'cultural margins' are always emerging and moving; and so what might have once seemed indisputably radical and counter-cultural may even be experienced as conservative and stuck-in-the-past by a new generation. Perhaps the question that all counsellors and psychotherapists should ask themselves is whether we want an over-professionalized (art) therapy to become part of a status-preoccupied, 'expert-driven' status quo, rather than the empowering, free counter-cultural

force which many believe it should be.

Moreover, without the existence of Mowbray's 'healthy fringe', it is difficult to imagine how such promising counter-cultural innovations as the UK Independent Practitioners Network (or IPN; e.g. Totton, 1997b; House, 2004), Denis Postle's recent important work on what he terms the 'PsyCommons' (Postle, 2013) or the campaigning Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy<sup>5</sup> could have taken root and flourished.

Practising Anthroposophical Arts therapists might be the very kind of practitioners who are suited to joining the quintessential 'self-generating practitioner community' that is the Independent Practitioners Network,<sup>6</sup> founded in 1994 as a response to the then seemingly inexorable momentum towards state regulation of the psy therapies. Certainly, any practitioners interested in pursuing a 'values-congruent' approach to accountability in their work would be warmly welcomed into the Network.

### Final thoughts

To return, finally, to my original question: Can, or should, the state regulate or control practices of the heart? I am reminded of what Steiner prophetically said in August 1919 about what the State does with our schools:

The state imposes terrible learning goals and terrible standards, the worst imaginable, but people will imagine them to be the best. Today's policies and political activity treat people like pawns. More than ever before, attempts will be made to use people like cogs in a wheel. People will be handled like puppets on a string. Things like institutions of learning will be created incompetently and with the greatest arrogance.... We have a difficult struggle ahead of us....

(Steiner, 1996, pp. 29–30)

I submit that precisely the same arguments apply

to the culturally vital work of the Anthroposophical Arts Therapies; and that to stay true to the heart-centred values at the core of their artistic therapeutic work, they need to find ways to continue their work in freedom, free of utilitarian state diktat and surveillance – as I'm sure Rudolf Steiner himself would have strongly advocated. 📍



**Richard House Ph.D.** is a former counsellor–psychotherapist, and a chartered psychologist (BPS) based in Stroud, UK, who is now a political campaigner and writer on various aspects of therapy, politics,

education and early childhood. A founder member of the Independent Practitioners Network (1994) and the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy (against statutory regulation) (2008), Richard formerly co-edited *Self & Society*, and has published many books, academic papers and professional articles in those fields. Richard is also a trained Steiner Waldorf class and Kindergarten teacher, an experienced Steiner Parent & Child group leader, and a former university senior lecturer (Roehampton and Winchester).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is an updated and extended version of a keynote address given to the Association of Anthroposophic Therapeutic Arts' annual conference, 'Awakening in the Heart Space: The Courage to Be Ourselves', Ruskin Mill, Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, 9 May 2015. The original talk was subsequently published in *Artspace: Journal of the Association of Anthroposophic Therapeutic Arts*, 1, 2016, pp. 18–22.

<sup>2</sup> 'Anthroposophical Arts Therapy' is an umbrella term for approaches to counselling and psychotherapy inspired by Rudolf Steiner's cosmology and view of the human being, with their approaches including music, singing, speech, and visual and creative art. See <http://www.aata-uk.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner was a relentless scourge of the one-sided

materialism prevailing in his day, bringing a spiritually informed underpinning to his worldview, and seeing the human being as far more than a material body. A natural clairvoyant from an early age, his so-called 'four-fold' view of the human being took account of the human being's non-material, subtle 'energy bodies' (etheric, astral, Ego) as well the sense-perceptible material body. These 'supersensible' insights fed directly into and informed his whole philosophy and praxis.

<sup>4</sup> Sourced from [goo.gl/Srv2sY](http://goo.gl/Srv2sY).

<sup>5</sup> See [goo.gl/RUKP1b](http://goo.gl/RUKP1b); and [goo.gl/ZCbCpa](http://goo.gl/ZCbCpa).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, <http://ipnetwork.org.uk/>; and [goo.gl/CcZYGR](http://goo.gl/CcZYGR).

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