

# Outside the box\*

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I started the talk with a Jewish joke.

A rabbi has an ecstatic vision and prostrates himself in front of the ark and says, 'Lord, Lord in Thine eyes I am nothing'. The cantor (singer) sees the rabbi and has a rush of emotion and also prostrates himself in front of the ark and says, 'Lord, Lord in Thine eyes I am nothing'. The shamash (caretaker) sees what is happening and rushes up to the ark and prostrates with the same words. Whereupon the rabbi turns to the cantor and says, 'Look who thinks he is nothing'.

It took some people a while to see the point. Having perhaps for a moment gone outside the box, the rabbi was putting himself back by putting down the shamash. Comparisons, especially those that make us superior, do that.

In my talk I referred to my short chapter in the book *Humanistic Psychology: Current trends and future prospects* (Shohet, 2018), where I outline four possible avenues of exploration. They were:

forgiveness (the world is locked into increasingly dangerous cycles of revenge);

understanding more about shock and trauma which leads us on to survival mechanisms which are ultimately self-defeating;

expanding the concept of pollution to include our thinking, referring to a paper I wrote titled 'How green is your mind?' (Shohet, 1995); and finally

an inquiry into the whole idea of a separate 'I', involving a failure to recognize that we are all connected, which allows us to commit atrocities both to others and to the planet.

In this article I want to develop why I chose this title for my talk. When I look deeply, I am terrified by the thought of people who accept things without questioning. As a Jew, deep within my psyche is Nazi Germany and the power of persuasion and propaganda. But there is no need just to mention that. Rwanda was at least as bad. And I could go on with other examples where we have embarked on an unquestioning collective madness which has involved slaughtering hundreds of thousands of people. Allowing ourselves to be hypnotized keeps us well inside the box.

And what I see happening is that psychology of many different kinds and schools has joined the bandwagon of wanting official recognition, which I see keeps us in the box. When I was at school it was recognized that if you made the trouble-maker into a prefect, he would behave, although he could well turn out to be a bully with his new-found power, demanding a conformity to the norms he previously rebelled against and has now introjected.

So I wonder if the need and desire for acceptance will drive psychology into the arms of the establishment. Like the prefect who has become part of the establishment, it will police its members and throw its newly found weight around. And we see this happening in complaints procedures. I cannot tell you how many therapists have told me they have been hung out to dry by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) – so much so that I wrote an article on complaints (*Self and Society* Vol 45 No. 1 April 2017)

I see the potential for that to happen in many branches of psychology and am putting in a plea for it not to happen to Humanistic Psychology. But

for it not to happen will, I think, demand a ruthless honesty, and the biggest enemy of that is self-deception. For those who want to explore this more, I recommend Margaret Heffernan's *Wilful blindness* (2011).

I believe that everything is in all of us – the saint, the sinner, the lover, the murderer. Although I think I am highly unlikely to kill (but it can't be definitely ruled out if, say, one of my children were threatened), I have killed off people in my mind. You may argue it is not the same, but I think an inquiry into our thinking will lend a certain humility to a sense of 'I could never do that'. The point I am making is that I had trouble finding the paedophile in me. I then realized that as far as I know two ingredients that make for a paedophile are abuse of power and self-deception. And I can find both of those.

So here are the ingredients. Human beings are prone to self-deception. We have forces that would prefer to manipulate, and if it makes us more comfortable, we will listen to those voices, whilst still claiming we are acting of our own free will. I had an experience of this when, at a conference, I said we were much more conditioned than we knew. A woman pipes up, 'I'm not'. I reply, 'So you think'. And she replies, 'I don't need a man to tell me how to think'. Some of the audience cheered her on, while many laughed because they realized I had proven my point. This was not a man telling her what to think, but a statement that had nothing to do with gender. It was a challenge about *all* our gender ideas are being, in fact, conditioned, and if we are to believe spiritual texts, even 'I am a man, you are a woman' is not the truth. Way outside the box, but interesting. The danger is of course in building a bigger box rather than really going outside it.

The story of Plato's cave comes to mind. In the cave, men are bound and seeing projected in front of them are the shadows from the fire which they take to be real. A man escapes and comes back and talks of the freedom outside, but nobody believes him and he is attacked. Outside the box is simple but much harder, as we will go outside group norms.

To this end CSTD London<sup>1</sup> is running a conference on looking at how much we are

conditioned. Culturally we see so many of our assumptions to be our culture's way of looking at things, but from a spiritual perspective anything less than our being connected to everyone and everything is separation-thinking and therefore well and truly in the box.

Returning to my fears around mindlessness (my own well included, of course) and how swathes of people will choose to believe, when I was writing a book on dreams (Shohet, 1985) I came across a book called *The Third Reich of dreams* by Charlotte Beradt (Beradt, 1968). This is a collection of dreams from Nazi Germany over the period 1933–39. What interested me is that people who consciously rejected the regime would have dreams showing that in their unconscious, something different was happening. So there are dreams of a Jewish doctor dreaming of saving Hitler's life and being very proud, or another where someone saw the brownshirts marching past and thought how ridiculous they looked; but in the next part of the dream the dreamer found himself marching with them and being very pleased. Our need to belong will overrule our conscious self, and the dreams in this book show this clearly.

Of relevance to my title is that consciously we might want to go outside the box but there are influences of which we are unaware, like the need for acceptance or to belong or to have status, or unresolved authority issues, which will lead us in another direction.

My speciality is supervision, and I use an exercise to show how much our minds make up stories. The exercise starts with the group in training writing, finishing the following sentence which I emphasize I will not ask them to share:

'What I would least like my supervisee to know about my work is....'

The next sentence I give them is:

'I would not want them to know because....'

I ask them to share their reasons (it's only for the first one that I say I won't ask them to share). The

reasons given are nearly always a variation on 'I am not good enough', or 'I will be criticized' – i.e. a self-judgement or a judgement of another (I have made a judgement that they will judge me). As we unpack this, the person realises that their reasons do not stand up to scrutiny, and they've been allowing themselves to believe their stories about why they shouldn't share. They have been staying in the box of their own thinking.

One of the clearest expositions of this way of being is *The untethered soul* by Michael Singer, who shows us how much we imprison ourselves. I have reviewed this book (Shohet, 2016). The work of Byron Katie<sup>2</sup> aims to get us not to believe our stories. How she lovingly dismantles them is a joy to watch on Youtube.

So Humanistic Psychology practitioners, refuse the tempting offers that might come your way! Two therapists on a newly started supervision course I'm running were told they would not be able to supervise trainees on a course they had been teaching on if they did our course because we were not AHPP-recognized. They came anyway, trusting that the right supervisees would come.

What will make you or me go outside the box? In my case, as I have mentioned it is an ancestral fear of what can happen if people do. But it is more than that. I do not think it is possible to be in the box and truthful. And wading through layers of self-deception requires a commitment and a certain courage, and a willingness to go outside group norms. In the early days, the 'adolescence' period of Humanistic Psychology, we could enjoy being different. The exciting days of encounter groups, 48-hour marathons, co-counselling, and the founding of Humanistic Psychology. It felt like we were outside the box, but I think we may have just had an exciting box.

When Byron Katie had her awakening she realised that every thought she had was not true. She devised a method of questioning all our thoughts – simply challenging our deepest held core beliefs by asking if what we had thought of as true was in fact true. My wish is that Humanistic Psychology actively encourages us to do the

same, to never to cease from our exploration of consciousness, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot. We may never get out of the box, but at least we will have more room to breathe. This could, in itself, become a more comfortable box, but I remember one of Byron Katie's sayings – 'If you want to know the truth, get an enemy'. If we keep heading in the direction of our discomfort, lovingly revealed by our so-called enemies, we may learn about the edges of our boxes.

Love can take us there, too. Not a personal love which has been the subject of pop songs, Shakespearean tragedies and the like, but a surrender to the Universal Love in which the personality would disappear.

And the personality will do all it can to put us back into the box. Watch its antics with detachment and with loving compassion, and sooner or later you will go outside the box and take us with you. It's what we long for, even as we resist it. **S**

\* Notes on a talk given at the conference 'Expanding a Humanistic Vision for a 21st Century Psychology', London, October 2017



**Robin Shohet** has been a therapist and supervisor for 40 years. In 1979 he co-founded the Centre for Supervision and Team Development ([www.cstdlondon.co.uk](http://www.cstdlondon.co.uk)) with his wife, Joan Wilmot,

through which they teach individual, group and team supervision worldwide. At the age of 70 he is learning the accordion, the tango and still plays football. He is a student of, and inspired by, *A Course in Miracles*.

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### Notes

1. See [www.cstdlondon.co.uk](http://www.cstdlondon.co.uk)
2. See [www.thework.com](http://www.thework.com)

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