THE LONG INTERVIEW

A Therapeutic and Spiritual Journey?

Emma Palmer (formerly Kamalamani) is interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [**RH**]: Emma, you're someone I've been aware of for many years, through the Independent Practitioners Network and Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility etc. and also through your writings; and I'll possibly embarrass you at the outset of this interview by saying that I've always been hugely impressed by everything I think I've ever heard you say, and the integrity that, for me, you consistently embody. Can you introduce yourself to our readers, perhaps saying something about how, in your biography, you were drawn to a spiritual and personal development journey?

Emma Palmer [**EP**]: Ha! You have made me blush. I love the thought of even sometimes embodying integrity, but I'm definitely work in progress…. I'm not sure I was drawn to a spiritual and personal development journey as such, or even now think of it as 'a journey'. I was always wildly curious – still am – and wanted to understand everything. I'd rub my eyes sitting up in bed at night, and when I'd see the white 'stars' coursing towards me I would try and look behind them, because I thought that would mean I could look behind the universe. I would spend hours on our local common with our dog, lost and totally at home in the elements, and more at home relating to animals than humans.

When I was 5 I asked to go to church because I wanted to understand what that was all about – I was quite influenced by my very faithful grandmothers. My nan was a former Catholic – her lifelong regret was that she was ex-communicated when she married my grampie, a divorcee. She would argue aloud with God, announcing flouncingly that she wouldn't be going to church today. My nana was a Christian Scientist, on the surface an orderly, quietly loving woman who couldn't have been more different in temperament to my nan. My family on both sides has a long history of non-conformism or people changing religion (and way, way too much Protestant work ethic).

Church-going didn't last long for me, but I retained a sense of wanting a home for my sense of faith. In my mid-thirties I was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order (WBO), having been practising since my early twenties, and having taught myself yoga from a book in my mid-teens, despite the fact that I never really felt drawn to organised religion. I resigned nearly four years ago. It's taken me until my forties to realise that faith doesn't need a home, it's boundless. I'm embarrassed to admit that. I mean, I sort of knew it, and I sort of didn't. Now words like 'faith', 'spirituality' and even 'Buddhism' leave me a bit cold, especially in these peri-menopausal years, gradually taking apart everything I spent the first four and a bit decades putting together.

These days I'm a fan of 'meaningfreeness' a term coined by my friend and mentor, David Loy, who's a Zen scholar and ecodharma activist. As he says: 'to accept meaninglessness, as part of the process of yielding to the no-thing-ness we dread, is to realize what might be called meaningfreeness. As a result life becomes more playful.' (Loy, 2000: xvi)

Being a total book worm as a child was also important in understanding myself, others, the world and its mysteries. When I was a child I knew I wanted to write, to weave the words that I loved, and continue to love so much, to teach – teachers were important mentors; and later on, to work in Africa – and I've done all of those things. Now, looking back, being an educator and word-weaving have been as important as being a therapist, and, of course, at times educating can be an important aspect of therapy. I no longer work overseas, but learnt so much in doing that work, too.

I was first drawn to training as a therapist when I was doing my PGCE to become a teacher. I loved being taught how to teach, and was blessed in having an excellent tutor, but knew early on that I wasn't interested in being a school teacher. One weekend we were offered training in basic listening skills as part of our pastoral development, and I knew there and then that I wanted to train as a therapist when I was old enough. That day finally

arrived in my late twenties when I started my initial training, and I've never looked back.

RH: Lots there I'd like to pick up on, Emma! I'm interested, first, in your wish not to use the term 'journey'. I realise the term can all-too-easily become a kind of humanistic cliché, and perhaps I'm guilty of such a casual usage here. Can you say more about your 'unease' with the term? (if 'unease' is the right word).

I also dabbled – superficially, I must add – with the WBO back in the 1980s and 90. I'm interested in the notion of 'resigning' (your term), for it implies that you must have been a 'member' in order to have to resign. Is being a 'member' traditionally part of Buddhism, and seen as an aspect of the disciplined commitment to the religious practice? And can you say something about how you came to resign? Was that more 'a rejection of…', or 'an evolution through and beyond…', for you? When you wrote 'faith doesn't need a home, it's boundless', I immediately started thinking about Krishnamurti's famous 'Truth is a pathless land' speech of 1929 (when he dissolved the Order of the Star), and whether that resonates for you at all.[1]

'Meaningfreeness' fascinates me too – is meaningfreeness not possible to subsist within organised institutional contexts? And if that's so, one obvious question that leads from this is, where does that leave you in relation to the human organisations and institutions of the therapy world?

Probably too much there! Just pick up on what you want to, Emma, and we'll see where it goes.

EP: That *is* a lot to pick up on! I hope it's okay if we focus on the Triratna question for now – this goes in a very different direction…. I'd be happy to talk about meaningfreeness later on.

I think your question asking why I don't like the term 'journey' links up with why I ended up resigning from Triratna (WBO), so I'll start there. 'Journey' can be a useful term, some people love it – in fact, I probably used to.... Perhaps it's simply because it can be an over-used cliché. It also puts the emphasis on the developmental aspects of Dharma practice – or any 'faith' practice – rather than what's immanent, the parting of veils, paying care-ful attention to the liminal, or being jolted by flash-of-lightning moments of realisation (okay – they're preciously few and far between!). The notion of the journey can over-emphasise a path of practice which can for me lose that sense of immediacy, possibility, even potency, even intimacy with experience. We're so busy figuring out which stage of the noble eight-fold path (a traditional Buddhist teaching) we're reflecting on, or debating, we miss the mind-blowing sunset ahead of us.

Yes, I do like that quotation 'truth is a pathless land' – I'd not heard it before, so thank you. It conjures up a sense of where I've been in the three-and-a-half years since resigning from Triratna. Leaving the order – and yes, one does become a 'member' in joining, which I think is unusual compared to more traditional orders/sanghas (spiritual communities) – was pathless. It was a wilderness. I've had times of being lost at sea and a feeling of failing – and sometimes being betrayed. Yet I somehow felt closer to the truth now – whatever that is. Looking at the note about Krishnamurti's speech (note 1), I'm more interested in knowing than belief – knowing in the belly and heart. I'm not sure belief or knowing are individual matters, either. I still like 'truth is a pathless land', though!

A sense of very necessary loss seemed to characterise my leaving of the order, which puts me in mind of those lines from the amazing 'Kindness' poem by Naomi Shihab-Nye:[2]

> Before you know what kindness really is
> you must lose things,
> feel the future dissolve in a moment
> like salt in a weakened broth.

My 'spiritual' future needed to dissolve in a moment. And it did. A few weeks after resigning from Triratna I had this sense of having my inner hard drive formatted so I literally couldn't remember any Dharma teachings. It was horribly unexpected and disconcerting, because I love the Dharma; learning it, practising it, teaching it – and *bam*! – it had gone, forced back to beginner's mind (no bad thing). It led to a long grieving process for all sorts of things. Leaving the order was very difficult on a social level, especially having practised in that context with those people since I was 24, and I'm glad to still have a few good friends there. Saying that, I realise I partly left because Triratna can be quite a closed system – even though many of its practitioners wouldn't view it as such, and I didn't when I was in it. I needed to get out, somehow, to breathe fresh air; the walls were too high.

It's very hard to say articulately and concisely why I left, especially as three-and-a-half years have elapsed, and that's been a rich phase in itself. It's ironic that

there's much talk in Triratna of 'spiritual death', especially at the point of readiness for ordination; yet it was leaving Triratna that gave me the most significant sense of 'spiritual death' I've experienced. There were other reasons: I felt the goal-posts had changed a lot over the years, for example in terms of an emphasis/need for coherence of teachings. The movement and order had lost quite a lot of its zesty edge, and there was talk of a 're-founding' of the order/movement, which didn't make sense to me at the time.

I was also increasingly disillusioned with how Sangharakshita, the founder, and his closest people didn't make amends – maybe didn't see the need to make amends – for his past 'sexual activities'. There were attempts at acknowledging the harm caused, and some really excellent people working hard on safeguarding in the present day, but there was something missing, which bothered me. So yes, it was a parting of ways and a gradual realisation that my heart wasn't in it; there wasn't enough resonance for me as a place of practice.

RH: I sensed that you might have something really interesting to say about 'the journey', Emma – and you certainly have. I really like how you start to tease out the tacit assumptions that accompany 'journey' discourse as soon as we uncritically deploy such clichés (perhaps, at least in part, to want to be seen to be wearing our allegiance on our sleeve, to feel the comfort of identifying with 'the tribe' and so on).

I think I've always been someone who's been pretty fearless at deconstructing the labels and linguistic positionings of discourses *other than* those I identify with – but much less able to see the limiting nature of the discourses I identify with myself. The favoured 'warm 'n fizzy' terms of our field, like 'journey', 'holistic', 'resonate', 'relational'. 'trust the process', 'be in the moment', 'attachment' (and the rest) are perhaps just as susceptible to closing down our thinking and creating a stultified status-quo mentality as are those terms we delight in disparaging most in the worldviews and 'regimes of truth' which we count as alien and 'other'. That's quite a chastening thought – but one that appeals to me, once I've stopped wincing. Manu Bazzano is a past (and present!) master at ferreting out and putting on the spot such taken-for-granted shibboleths that populate our field – I think you and Manu could have a very interesting conversation. And I find myself wondering whether your previously mentioned notion 'meaningfreeness' might somehow fit in here somewhere?...

Also, it's interesting that you say 'A few weeks after resigning from Triratna… I literally couldn't remember any Dharma teachings. It was horribly unexpected….'. This is entirely consistent with what Rudolf Steiner says, in the sense that paradoxically, a vital aspect of learning is forgetting and then re-membering. So perhaps it was great and fitting that you forgot, and that your 'organism' (*ooops*… – there's another one) knew what it needed to do.

You speak of being 'more interested in knowing than belief – knowing in the belly and heart'. Is this the distinction between cognitive / intellectual belief, versus visceral embodied knowing?; and is this a distinction that is present in the Buddhist cosmology?

This also really spoke to me – '…I partly left because Triratna can be quite a closed system – even though many of its practitioners wouldn't view it as such, and I didn't when I was in it. *I needed to get out*, somehow, *to breathe fresh air*; the walls were too high.' (my italics) There's so much in this! I'm wondering whether there's something about *all* institutions, whatever their nature and however noble their aims and practices, that ultimately and inevitably means that they limit us, and eventually lead to stultification and *lack of fresh air*. Krishnamurti once again, on institutionalisation: '*nor should any organisation be formed to lead* or coerce *people along any particular path*. If you first understand that, then you will see how impossible it is to organise a belief.' (my italics) I suppose one question stemming from this might be – is it possible to have a human institution which has absolutely no pre-decided templates, agendas, assumptions, precepts, rules – even values – and which opens a space for whatever might emerge from moment to moment? Certainly, in encounter groups I've been in, such a total lack of structure and structur*ing* seem to bring up huge levels of (existential?) anxiety.

Lots for you to feast on there, as you wish!

EP: Yes, I agree I'm much less able (and willing!?) to see the limiting nature of the discourses with which I personally identify. Your mentioning 'trust the process' made me laugh. When I was first in training I had the good fortune to be supervised by Arthur Musgrave, here in Bristol. One day I was musing (possibly moaning) about the over-use of that very phrase and from then on he would gently pull my leg about it which, frankly, needed to happen, jogging me out of my anti-trust position (I actually quite like the

phrase now, even though I mightn't say it out loud). I also over-use the words 'resonate' and 'resonance'.

Yes, I think 'meaningfreeness' does fit in here somewhere, and immediately Nick Totton's use of the word 'boundlessness' (Totton, 2010) comes to mind, too. I think because both these terms/notions blow things wide open, and slightly frazzle my mind, so that other parts which habitually get less of a look-in are able to engage without prematurely or too quickly fixing or fossilising. Sometimes even the process of dwelling with the possibility of meaningfreeness or boundlessness, for example, in mulling over a difficult situation in my life, or reflecting on client work, leads to that sense of knowing to which I referred earlier – and the importance and riches of *not* knowing.

I am interested in a sense of embodied knowing – as an antidote to the headier knowing of my much younger self, failing fabulously at fitting in as an academic fairly early in life; but even then, what do those words mean? I'm grappling for words as I write, and find myself sitting here gesturing. Right now I'm more interested in presence, simply engaging with this moment (getting close to clichés again….). I've appreciated very much practising zazen over the past few years from this point of view, having spent the previous two-plus decades practising more Tibetan Buddhist practices with a more developmental focus. I'm not sure I mean 'knowing' as much as being here, showing up as fully as possible, and not angsting about my mental states (a preoccupation of a previous Buddhist incarnation) and engaging, with all the previous moments echoed in this one. I remember Maura Sills, co-founder of Karuna, defining 'sati' – broadly translated as 'mindfulness', another much over-used and mis-used term – once at a therapy conference, and I wish I could remember her exact words; it was beautiful how she described it.

In discussing the nature of knowing/not knowing/presence, I remember that sense of my Dharma hard drive being wiped again. It's great to be reminded by you that Steiner saw forgetting as a vital aspect of learning. With middle-age and under-active thyroid and anaemic-induced brain fog, I just hope I do re-member. I mean that – this age and time of life can feel very de-skilling in consensus reality which rewards intellect, quick thinking, and feeling cognitively reliable. I find myself longing for my 20 year-old brain. And yet there's also something great about grappling, feeling stuck for words, feeling like what I'm saying is clunky, showing our workings for a change and reminding myself that I want to take my time over re-membering (remind me of that when we're going to print…!). In the times we're in, it actually feels quite useful to have had the experience of having had my hard drive formatted, because I've learned some useful things in this wilderness.

I'm interested in what you say about organisations and my leaving of Triratna, with its 'too high' walls. (As an aside, reading *my* words re-italicised in *your* words, I'm wondering if another aspect playing out here is trauma I experienced at birth, an area of work which fascinates me and which I'm currently studying; but that's definitely a tangential conversation – interesting though it is.)

I've historically not been a big joiner of things, and joining Triratna was huge, because it was the most significant 'joining' this lifetime, so far. For sure there was strong persuasion in Triratna along a particular path – though I can't say I was coerced, or not explicitly. There have been times when I've thrived in both organisational settings and in contexts which have been self-organising – and yes, institutions can easily become victims of their own success in stultifying what they started out hoping to nurture. There's a strong case for me to let organisations and institutions gracefully die so new things can come to life.

Triratna has a curious blend of structure and self-organisation. For example, each centre which is established is autonomous, groups are often self-forming and self-organising, and yet the overall culture has/had practices, traditions, assumptions which I found far from self-organising. Perhaps that's partly why I found it too confusing to stay – it wasn't what it said it was on the tin? Or maybe there was an attempt to secretly re-label the tin at some point in the years after my ordination? For someone who used to puzzle at the words 'trust the universe', perhaps I'm extreme in, on the one hand, quite enjoying structured places – for short periods, at least! – as well as valuing being in more encounter-group type settings. It's power and the naming of power which cut the difference for me, being as 'see through' as we possibly can about why we're here, why we're showing up. Of course, that's fraught with danger, too, 'cos we're human and I/we often don't know why we show up; we make mistakes and live in a culture where, sadly, mistake-making isn't embraced as a creative, learning thing.

RH: I really like your take on 'meaningfreeness', Emma. For one thing, it bursts open for interrogation

the oft-taken-for-granted existential-humanistic cliché that 'we are meaning-seeking creatures', and that *finding meaning* is our principal driver. Well perhaps it is – but also, perhaps, not for the warm, fuzzy, innocent reasons that we existential-humanists like to think it is! (I'm thinking psychoanalysis and the Unconscious here – but I'll park that one for a bit.)

I'm making a link here between meaning-making and how we habitually privilege our own stories (the insufferable '…I know just how you feel!' syndrome, we might call it). In another interview I've recently done with Robin Shohet for *Self & Society*, Robin speaks about how 'no' doesn't have to be oppositional. He wrote, 'It was simply "No". There was no story attached and *it is the making of stories that creates the opposition*, not the "No".' (my italics) And Robin goes on to say, '…We are constantly adding meaning to give the illusion of control'.

What a different perspective on meaning-making that is! Making or finding meaning feels good, I'm assuming – so perhaps the driver behind meaning-making is the wish to feel good! That begins to sound rather different to the warm/fuzzy/innocent way of understanding meaning-making that existential-humanism tends to (uncritically?) assume. Does this sound like one way of making sense (ha! – there I go again…) of 'meaningfreeness'?

And to invoke psychoanalysis, one could also say that meaning-seeking is actually (always?) *a defence* – not least because it's necessarily a moving-away-from the visceral now. I also think of the constant, incessant distractions that we surround ourselves with (in Neil Postman's (1986) terminology, 'amusing ourselves to death') –and which Western materialistic human culture desperately generates like flotsam. Perhaps we *tell ourselves a comfortable story* that this is merely innocent 'fun-loving' entertainment and fulfilling our dreams by 'creating new memories' (and all the other self-justifying clichés) – when in reality it's a continual running-away from the terror of just being.

Without wanting to sound like an old cynic… – re 'embodied knowing': I sense that this might be another of those clichés-in-the-making so everyone can feel good about themselves, and the wisdom they're displaying, when they invoke it (and I'm not including you in this – as you refreshingly questioned it immediately!). Your 'finding yourself sitting here gesturing', without words, reminded me of Lakoff and Johnson's 'philosophy of the flesh' (1999), and how they challenge the metaphysical assumption that our thinking about the world is literal and straightforwardly representational (or 'a mirror of nature' – *à la* Richard Rorty, 1979), and that human reason is disembodied and universal. For Lakoff and Johnson, much of philosophy's subject matter relies heavily on metaphors derived from bodily experience, with the very structure of our thoughts coming from the nature of the body. Psychoanalytically speaking, they would also claim that our unconscious metaphors are also based on common bodily experiences (all of which slight detour reminds me… – we really want a retro review of Lakoff and Johnson's important 1999 challenge to Western metaphysics in the journal, if any reader would like to submit one).

What you call 'consensus reality which rewards intellect, quick thinking, and feeling cognitively reliable' feels very important. Perhaps this is part of the tyranny of the left brain that Iain McGilchrist claims is currently taking human civilisation to the brink of unsustainability (McGilchrist, 2009; see also Hooper Hansen, 2020). Though I don't work as a therapist now, I see the challenging of this ideology as one of Therapy's most important evolutionary cultural callings (and of course I don't mean CBT, which I see as merely colluding with and reinforcing the left-brain tyranny). And I love your phrase 'showing our workings *for a change*' (my italics) – there's a delicious (perhaps unintended?) double entendre there; and perhaps this also is what therapy does, i.e. create a space where everything, and perhaps *especially* 'the workings', are OK and to be welcomed – with perhaps the workings actually being more important than any neat finished 'product' or 'outcome'. And 'being as "see through" as we possibly can about why we're here, why we're showing up', too. That for me is a very 'Humanistic Psychology' kind of view, and part of our distinctive take on therapy that challenges the hegemony of the left brain, hyper-modernity, and 'the cognitively reliable'.

Re 'There's a strong case for me to let organisations and institutions gracefully die so new things can come to life' – this is a real biggie, I think. What is it that stops us from being able to let go and trust that for vital new life to emerge actually *needs* such dyings to have their course? And how can we know when the time has come to allow the dying to happen?

Having disgracefully hijacked your interview again (because shutting-up is my problem), I'd love to hear your words-of-the-flesh on any or all of this!

EP: Hijack away, I appreciate your associations – though I can't always keep up. What leapt to mind, reading, was the day, as a new undergraduate in Liverpool going through my reading list, I came across Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live by* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). I loved it – I couldn't stop reading, being so deliciously challenging to my 18 year-old brain, longing for challenge. Perhaps that was the day I became destined to become a body psychotherapist – but didn't know it yet. I was delighted when *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) was published, coinciding with the early part of my initial therapy training. What a tome – and no, I'm not offering to do that retro review; I don't think I'd do it justice.

I've been re-reading the final chapter of *Philosophy in the Flesh* with embodiment and meaning-making and meaningfreeness on my mind, and this jumps straight out:

> The environment is not an 'other' to us. It is not a collection of things that we encounter. Rather, it is part of our being. It is the locus of our existence and identity. We cannot and do not exist apart from it. It is through empathic projection that we come to know our environment, understand how we are part of it and how it is part of us. This is the bodily experience by which we can participate in nature… as part of nature itself, part of a larger, all-encompassing whole. A mindful embodied spirituality is thus an ecological spirituality. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 566)

That's a great final sentence – even though I'm not a fan of the 's' word; and I don't entirely agree with the earlier bit that 'we come to know our environment' through 'empathic projection'. And yet, because of the vast majority of us humans' disconnection from other-than-human and more-than-human life, it's so hard to know, to be bodies being nature, to understand that, to be wholly present.

In the era of soundbite articles, fake news and quick fixes, paying attention to the knowledge that 'we are part of it and it is part of us' gets lost, over and over. It's tragic; and thinking of the interrelated catastrophes of climate chaos, the 6th extinction and the erosion of habitats, among others, it'll probably be our undoing. Well, looking at the pandemic we're in is a case in point, if we believe the coronavirus originates from a wet market in Wuhan. The 'we are part of it and it is part of us' gets lost in the frenzy of the busyness – even the busyness of a pandemic-induced lockdown.

Perhaps sadder still is that occasionally – and thankfully it is only very occasionally – when I've been facilitating 'Wild Therapy' days and workshops (the form of ecopsychology I practise) there's a sense that re-engaging (because it *is* re-engaging for most of us) with that seeing how we are part of it and it is part of us isn't enough. There's a thirst for models, more content, more – generally just more of any and everything, really. The great hunger of our age, evoking images of the so-called 'hungry ghost' from the ancient Tibetan Wheel of Life or 'bhavacakra' (see Nhat Hanh (1998, p. 230) for a useful exploration of the wheel of life and the 'interdependence of co-arising').

I think that's what I particularly love (and hate, truthfully) about zen practice. Sitting there, confronted by my own physicality, often confronted by my own disembodying and the restless longing to be anywhere but here. Then the flashes of bliss and the deep lake of complete and utter contentment. The moments of accepting being here, incarnate, with all its fabulously messy complexity, without embroidering my thoughts or having to make meaning, or in your words continually 'running-away from the (sometimes) terror of just being'.

I love the bare-boned physicality of zazen compared to other practices I've done in the past, especially some of the very elaborate Tibetan practices. This made me smile from Shigeo Michi: 'Since zazen is the posture in which a human being does nothing for the sake of a human being, the human being is freed from being a human being and becomes a Buddha' (from *Songs of Life—Paeans to Zazen* by Daiji Kobayashi, for which I'm afraid I can't find a reference – I can only find it quoted in secondary online sources). The spirit of meaningfreeness certainly imbues this sentence.

Dogen, the great 13th-century practitioner who founded the 'soto' school of Zen, underlines how the objective of zazen is just to sit in *kekka-fuza* correctly, with absolutely nothing to add to it. In the well-known words of Kodo Sawaki Roshi, the influential Zen master of early 20th-century Japan: 'Just sit zazen, and that's the end of it.' That's such a relief in this age of mindless distraction and the

sometimes head f**kery of over-thinking, and over-intellectualising, when, again, in the words of Lakoff and Johnson: 'we are part of it and it is part of us'.

We're so busy thinking, we fail to notice
our surrounding, the earth beneath us and sky above us, the person or being in front of us. It's a challenge, 'the terror of just being', particularly when we're groomed as constant consumers. I was a teenager in Thatcher's Britain, a repulsed-by-Thatcher teenager, admittedly, but conditioned, nonetheless. The image that comes to mind in meeting these challenge is an image of Green Tara, a Buddha figure in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, who has one leg tucked up in meditation posture and one stepping down from the lotus leaf, off to engage with world. That balance is most likely my lifelong practice; sitting still and engaging, sitting still and engaging….

RH: I'm sure you would do more-than-justice to *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Emma! :-). I had a parallel experience to yours; when trawling the Philosophy of Science section in UEA library in the 1980s, my 30-something year-old brain came across, and was blown away by, Mark Johnson's then new book *The Body in the Mind*. I also knew in my cells that I'd stumbled across something hugely important in this book – the rest is Johnson–Lakoff history, of course. Looking back, I've said far far too much in this interview (bloke talking too much, and all that), for which I need to, and do, apologise; and so a few brief comments and then back to you.

Re the 'we are part of it and it is part of us' theme – and your experience that people need something more than this: I'm wondering (grandiosely) about the evolution of consciousness, and how our urgent task is perhaps to transcend the splits of Cartesianism, and the foundational assumptions and one-sided materialism of Western metaphysics – that's what makes people like Derrida and Merleau-Ponty so exciting for me. And perhaps one reason why we find what these writers say so difficult to grasp is precisely because we're still so caught up in Cartesianism.

I love (and squirm at) '…We're so busy thinking we fail to notice… the person or being in front of us', Ooouuccch. Again I think that's symptomatic of what Iain McGilchrist is speaking of – we need to rediscover the heart (and the body) to balance out the tyranny of the head, perhaps.

Could you tell us something about your ecotherapy practice, Emma – how you work, who your biggest influences have been, and how you see the way in which you work fitting in – or not! – with other streams of therapy practice. And perhaps how your practice might relate to some of the things we've been speaking of in this interview, too.

EP: Of course. I find it hard to say explicitly how I work ecopsychologically, because my work and life is shaped by my connection, and sometimes disconnection, from other-than-human and more-than-human life, and has been for as long as I can remember. It fits fluidly with the rest of my therapy, facilitation and writing. Jumping to the second part of your question, maybe an easier way in – the biggest influences were/have been my German shepherd dog growing up, a horse I looked after for a year when I was 14–15 years old, and interactions with a whole host of other-than-human and more-than-human beings. Those beings taught me beyond my humanness. That's a funny phrase, but I'm not sure how else to say it. They taught me, or showed me, that being human is but one part of who I am; and, for me, fairly ambivalent being human, particularly in my early life, speaking horse or dog came more naturally than speaking English.

When I came to read about ecopsychology in actual books, I found Jerome Bernstein's book *Living in the Borderland: The Evolution of Consciousness and the Challenge of Healing Trauma* like walking through an archway. I mean, I find it a bit wordy and clunkily written, and yet I've much gratitude to him as I'm glad to be, in his words, a 'borderlander' – someone 'whose transrational experience is nothing short of sacred… who would not be able to function in our society without their deep personal connection to that domain' (Bernstein, 2005, p. xvi). As a child I couldn't have functioned without being lost and found in the elements – maybe I wouldn't have survived if I hadn't had the freedom to roam around the common and woods and paths close to home. I can't know.

So my starting-point is deep gratitude to life. Which sounds very grandiose, as I read it, although that's the opposite of my intention. Recently I realise that there was reciprocity, too. This spring, I wrote a 'A horse and a girl' for *Unpsychology* magazine (Palmer, 2020a) about our relationship – the horse who came to stay and me, when I was 14. She was incredibly troubled when she arrived, jogging sideways up the road and rearing up when I tried to halter her. She left much calmer, and she left me

much calmer. Mutual healing went on in very ordinary ways, finding ways to stop, make contact, get to know, turn away again, relate again – this human and horse dance. And love, a lot of love.

Maybe, truthfully, that's what ecopsychology is: 'mutual healing' in 'very ordinary ways', and creating any methods, forms, play encouraging that. Given our human propensity to not know 'we are part of it and it is part of us' – partly, as you say, because of those pervading, horrific Cartesian splits – even recognising we are part of so-called nature and nature is part of us is profound. And really ordinary. I am baffled when ecopsychology and ecotherapy folk romanticise nature and turn it into another commodity for therapy work, packaging it up, branding it etc. Because for me, nature – that word again – is a bit like human nature: sometimes beautiful, sometimes life-taking – it's everything.

Including the body, embodying and disembodying experiences, and the movement of working alone and with others (human or not), is for me absolutely at the heart of ecopsychology work, because re-cognising we are part of nature and that it's part of us starts with this body, here, now. I'm glad to have done further training with Nick Totton in both Embodied-Relational and Wild Therapy, because central to both is *embodied relationality*. In Wild Therapy in particular, this is with all of life around us, becoming part of the therapeutic container. This work helps the long, slow, many generations of healing needed in our Cartesian-drenched culture. In ecotherapy work I'm confused (maddened) when there are hints of pitting ourselves *against* nature, maybe proving ourselves, in some work I've come across – maybe more wilderness-based work. That is an anathema to me, because it purposely underlines a duality between human and other-than and more-than-human. That's not to say people shouldn't climb mountains, or abseil, or bungee jump if they wish; just maybe don't call it 'ecopsychology'?

In my practice, ecopsychology may or may not include working outdoors. I wrote 'A walk in the park?' blog (Palmer, 2020b) at the beginning of the pandemic, as there were discussions popping up on various therapy networks about whether/how to work outdoors given the pandemic, with people already tiring of online platforms. What was funny was making the point that working outdoors isn't necessarily essential in practising ecopsychology. We can experience the wild outdoors and in. Of course, some clients are scared of being in wilder places, perhaps because of difficult experiences, or because their circumstances meant they never had the opportunity to meet other-than and more-than-human life beyond the realms of the city. Thankfully, we're also starting to realise that ecopsychology can be pretty privileged, and white-dominated – another critical factor in not assuming working outdoors is always within reach (for a useful exploration of this see Rust, 2020).

Having said all that, I loved leading Wild Therapy in wilder, remote places some of the time. It's great to witness people a little changed, returning from solo days in landscapes watched over by vultures and eagles, thinking of the Catalunyan Pyrenees. The point I'm trying to make is that re-cognising, re-membering we are part of nature and that it's part of us can happen anywhere. It can happen on Zoom, it can happen during social dreaming on a Wild therapy weekend workshop, or a client purposely exploring their relationship with what's wild and what's tame during a one-to one-session.

The vital conditions are, I think, beyond our therapy skills and life experiences, are realising that we're not just human, softening our human edges, and being prepared to be receptive to the other-than and more-than-human within and beyond us**.** This is easy to write, harder to be, to embody. Funnily enough, I woke up with something new (to me) to say about this beyond 'humanness' for this interview, and it's already evaporated, gone! I like that – either brain fog or the dreaming body (not just *my* dreaming body) pulling the leg of the more cerebral parts. As I get more fluent in the language of being animal, being dreaming, being prayer, tuning out a little from the fixation on the man-made, the busyness, the productivity, being useful, ordinary magic is there, poised.

I'm not sure whether I've answered your question or not, as to how my practice relates to some of the things we've talked about in this interview; hopefully I did a bit, even if inadvertently. I struggle a bit talking about 'my practice' – you probably noticed that as I grappled with exploring ecopsychology. My practice in a therapy session is showing up as fully as possible, resting on the learning so far, especially relational struggles and breakthroughs in my own life. Then the client starts to talk, or gestures, or doesn't know what to say, and off we go. I find it a bit disingenuous, to be honest, trying to summarise my practice because it's so variable from client to client, supervisee to supervisee, or training group to training group. Jung and Yalom got it right (and a few other things,

besides) that we have to invent a new form of therapy for each of our clients. I love the spirit of that.

RH: That gives a wonderful picture of your work, Emma – thank you. We have space for just one more question (and, thankfully, not too much more from me). This really spoke deeply to me: 'Those beings taught me *beyond my humanness*… being human is but one part of who I am' (my italics). This left me wondering whether Humanistic Psychology might suffer from an *excess* of human-centredness; that is, in our urgent and understandable wish to protect the human from the *in*human (Sim, 2001) and anti-human (which I see as being crucially different from the 'other-than human' and 'more-than-human'), we perhaps over-essentialise the human, and so become too narrow in our human-centredness. Does that make any sense to you?

I also love Bernstein's 'sacred transrational experience', and the idea of 'not be[ing] able to function in our society without [a] deep personal connection to that domain'. I don't mean I love the latter phenomenon! – but rather, *the new way of thinking* about Being that it potentially opens up. What it says to me is that we simply won't be able to function in our full humanity *unless* we fully connect with the more-than-human (the spiritual) and the other-than-human. I can hear the late John Rowan's urgent injunction: 'Don't you dare ignore the transpersonal!' (Rowan, 2014).

And your phrase '…all of life around us becoming part of the therapeutic container', and the impossibility of summarising your practice *because it's so variable*. These statements speak deeply to what so annoys me about how limiting the over-professionalisation of therapy practice can be – i.e. that it commonly *pre-imposes* a 'therapeutic frame', which it then defines as 'the container' – rather than the latter being an emergent, co-created aspect of the work (and quite possibly a vital co-created healing experience for both client and therapist). This also speaks to what you refer to as the commodification and thingification of ecotherapy. I think perhaps we've found our way back to Cartesianism! How can we create a therapeutic space that does the best we currently can to transcend thingification and commodification, I'm wondering?

So I'll leave you with those disparate closing thoughts, and invite you to close this brilliant interview in whatever way you'd like to. Thank you so much for enabling it to happen, Emma.

EP: Yep, that over-essentialising of the human makes a lot of sense to me – and John Rowan was in my mind, too, writing that last reply. We're as fallible to it in Humanistic Psychology and wider therapy as anywhere else, particularly but not only as what constitutes therapy is being squeezed into narrower definitions, and 'permitted' forms of practice, more prescription and less healing and somatic midwifery.

An excess of human-centredness make sense, too. Being here and being human is an art – life's a work of art, isn't it? Full Shakespeare. What I'm slowly learning to trust, particularly through zen, and the book-writing process, is that works of art are collective endeavours, rather than being about me or mine. I've had these sacred moments in book-writing when I sense, viscerally, those who made the book possible – Wilhelm Reich when I was writing *Meditating with Character* (Kamalamani, 2012), and my afore-mentioned horse friend when writing *Bodywise* (Kamalamani, 2017). Ancestors, spirits, English teachers, family members; all characters in our works of art. All of life is there – or *here.* It's what I love about the Buddhist teaching of 'sunyata', often translated as 'emptiness' – not a word with great connotations linguistically. If we turn it round and say 'sunyata' is about the constant fluidity of conditions, of new possibilities and potentialities arising, forming, dissolving, something else arising, and so on, then it sounds very different.

Of course, it's not surprising that we constantly want to get hold of life being a work of art, pin it down, thinking we're great, or we're truly awful – depending on which day it is and how the art's shaping up (or not), either 'talking up' or shamefully denying our life. I mean, we all do that repeatedly, it's the learning. No wonder 'commodification and thingification' ends up happening, as we're determined to prove ourselves and shore up what we're about, what we're 'selling' in these highly competitive late-stage capitalist times – and these end times. Times when the bottom line is wealth rather than life, even as we stare mass extinction in the face. It's hard to be receptive and fluid – not to be confused with passive and wishy-washy – as we fight inhumanity, anti-humanity, and the institutionalised harm caused to other-than and more-than-human beings and life – but surely it's worth the try?

Notes

1 In this momentous speech, K said: 'Truth is a pathless Land.... Truth cannot be organised; nor should any organisation be formed to lead or coerce people along any particular path.... A belief is purely an individual matter, and you cannot and must not organise it. If you do, it becomes dead, crystallised; it becomes *a creed... to be imposed on others.*' (my italics)

2 The full poem is available at https://poets.org/poem/kindness (accessed 3 October 2020).

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