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'How Humanistic Psychology Has Changed My Life'

By **Nick Duffell**

To me, Humanistic Psychology is the great Boomer legacy. I mean, it feels like a real sixties thing that came dancing out of Bob Dylan's rolling, iconic challenge, 'How does it feel?'. And we needed it. It must be hard for those born in the last 40 years to quite get how we weren't allowed to feel. How life seemed shot in black and white, how when you were out of shorts you dressed like your granddad, how education was based on the premise that you were a stupid child who knew nothing. How, if you stepped out of line, you were going to get a whack; and if you showed any vulnerability at all you were a pathetic sissy.

It was also an urban thing. I remember London filling up with the good-looking from the country, who later set out for India or for cottages in Wales or Sussex to urbanize the countryside. We were busy trying to find ourselves, embody the good life, escape the culture of repression, materialism and militarism to explore the inner landscape. We got high to get *into* stuff, not out of it. In the end, some sold out, some burned out and many of us crashed out.

I had my first breakdown – or 'crisis of meaning', as my first therapist helped me name it – at 30. I dragged my young family out of mellow Mid-Wales back to London, settling in squat land – socialist Finsbury Park. My neighbours had a veggy bakery in the basement whose smell alarmed the retired bus conductor's wife next door but failed to charm the Doc Martin-shod women's cooperative opposite. We were broke but lived in a massive crumbling Victorian house in an area that resisted the gentrification about to engulf north London. From there I sought out the Bioenergetics I had read about.

Midweek evenings were spent at the American School in St Johns Wood, running round in sweaty circles, yelling things we were supposed to be repressing. It felt a bit formulaic to me, and one night when I was told to scream 'I want more money!', I knew it was my last. I wasn't too interested in money, but I did want something. So I found myself instead cycling up to Hampstead for Gestalt groups, where we were told to leave our shoes at the door along with our constructs, and we learned how to process.

I loved it. The ritual of going round the room taking turns to feel, express, share and sometimes beat the daylights out of a poor cushion was just what I had been looking for in those other rituals of getting high and imagining we were connecting when we really weren't. For a while I thought I was coming home. Gestalt offered a whole new language: those on the outside didn't get it, so it was a bit exclusive. Perhaps it became too cosy for me, and when someone proposed I was becoming 'a good little Gestaltist', I quit.

Then the headaches started. That wrecked my life, well before I had learned about somatization. When the doctors could find nothing, I tried acupuncture, then mediating by water. Eventually a friend recommended individual therapy, which seemed to involve admitting you had a problem. My therapist, however, was a kindly, chunky man who talked about values, meaning and purpose, and that felt right. I had arrived at Psychosynthesis, one of the transpersonal therapies which – rumour had it – had formed their own association at the annual meeting of humanistic psychologists when Fritz Perl's crawled round the room slobbering 'Mama' to each of the assembled worthies and Abraham Maslow reeled in disgust.

In therapy I was able to acknowledge for the first time that I was unhappy in my marriage. Having said it out loud, I knew I had to get out. But how to leave when I was the father of two young boys? This was the hardest thing I had ever done, and getting through it delayed exploring my own inner difficulties and immaturities for a good while.

Supportive as my therapy was, it wasn't great on what we now call boundaries. First I was encouraged to enrol for an intensive introductory course for potential trainees. This wasn't what I was thinking of, but I loved all the guided visualizations and drawing exercises and sub-personalities dialoguing with each other. Here we learned that we could not only repress our darker or uncivilized sides but also our spiritual sides. And then I fell in love with a woman on the group, so I had to sign up for the full year. My fate was sealed, even if I considered myself a client pretending to be a therapist.

Next, my therapist revealed one of his dreams to me. Apparently, I had a role to play concerning masculinity and he invited me to assist him on a therapeutic workshop programme for men. How could I refuse? I was pretty useless at it then, but I have been working at it ever since, so the dream was indeed prophetic. My co-assistant was a certain John Rowan, just completing his book *The Horned God* and reinforcing that I was but an imposter. But I learned a lot. I visited one of our group in prison after he'd murdered his wife in a fit of jealous rage. Emotions and relationships were not just constructs – they had consequences, if you couldn't learn to manage them. I also began to recognize that I wasn't the only one who had been harmed by years of institutionalization as a child, and started to think through what became Boarding School Survivors.

At the same time, guilty about my own divorce, I did a systemic training and worked as a Family Conciliator with divorcing families in a probation office. As the only male in the service I was regularly wheeled out whenever we had an angry man in the office in agony over the emotional minefield of custody and access arrangements. Then I joined a team of systemic therapists seeing families for an outer London local authority, with a two-way mirror and all the trimmings. We were the bad guys there for refusing to read the page-long biro-written reports that the social workers plonked in our in-tray, preferring to see them with their families, because they were 'part of the system' to us. Eventually, the line manager gave us all the sack; they spent the money on design consultants, repainting their vans with up-beat slogans about what Hillingdon was doing for everyone.

All this was fairly grounding after the lofty heights of Psychosynthesis, and I am deeply grateful for the experience. Besides, being trained to deal with existential crises didn't help much in the church-based counselling centre where I was learning the craft and trying to cope with other people's marriage breakdowns and countless sexual abuse disclosures. I realised that to run a practice you had to go where the methodology was tried and tested, so I enrolled in psychoanalytic evening classes. Bob Young was a philosopher-cum-Kleinian who taught me that projective identification was simply a communication and therapists had better listen out carefully. Responding to my own integrative mishmash, Bob advised 'you have to pitch your tent somewhere, Nick'. He introduced me to the work of Harold Searles, whose compassion and understanding for patients seemed to surpass any humanistic notions I had encountered. I devoured the bizarre literature of psychoanalysis with its peculiar pseudo-scholarship and was ready to try it out.

A couple of 50 minutes with a 'gatekeeper' later, I got referred to a man whose small dog yapped hysterically when I rang at the appointed hour. My sixth session was on the Monday following my wedding, so after the usual 'what comes to mind?' I started to recount the ceremony. My analyst interpreted that I was really thinking of the marriage between him and me. I was speechless. Cycling home, I realised I now needed something more humanistic than this, so during the 'break' I gave notice by letter and enclosed a cheque. A hand-written reply informed me that no such cheque was in fact found and he advised my returning to discuss my ambivalence about leaving. Brilliant letter, I thought – definitely worth one more time to try the couch out before quitting psychoanalysis. This time the interpretation was that I was leaving because on the couch I had feared a homosexual attack from behind! Later I realised the truth in this: I really didn't want a hyper-rational male investigating my psyche's backside.

I went back to the humanistic world and followed the post-Jungians around, studied shamanism in America and trained in bodywork in Holland. Sexual Grounding Therapy introduced me to a solid body of developmental theory with hour-long experiments in sweaty trance-dance sessions and how to reprogramme internalized Object Relations with ideal parents. Psychoanalysis offered a great tool to work with the unconscious but had no model of health, I reckoned. So today, when person-centred therapy is everywhere, I specialize in training hard-line humanistics to use the transference phenomena that dominate difficult sessions, such as with couples or ex-boarders, and helping the seriously psychodynamic to loosen up, use some bodywork and put themselves into the frame.

Does Humanistic Psychology still have relevance today? We haven't beaten capitalism with it nor stopped many wars, but I note that some of the new socio-political philosophies like Metamodernism take it as read that the inner life of humans is inseparable from the outer, that self and society are eternal twins that need our attention. That counts as a legacy to me.

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