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'How Humanistic Psychology Has Changed My Life'

By **Jennifer Maidman**

From an early age I preferred to consult a book when I didn't know something, rather than ask a person. Asking questions betrayed my unworldliness and naivety, of which I was ashamed, and often led to my being bullied. I was assigned male at birth, but I was what would now be called a transgender child. However, having been born in 1958, no such concept existed in the mainstream back then.

I was constantly at war with my own nature, and tried so hard NOT to think about being a girl, but I couldn't stop the thoughts from coming. The more I tried to resist, the more compulsive the thoughts became. I was terrified of being exposed, and dreaded the consequences; yet I also longed to be seen. I would often fantasize that my Mum – it was always my Mum – had discovered my secret. In my fantasy, instead of being shocked or angry she would be kind and tell me it was OK to be a girl. She would explain everything to my Dad. It was all going to be alright now.

This was my world as a child. I was full of conflict, confusion and emotional turmoil. Often it was physically painful; my face hurt so much from all the pretending that I wanted to scream.

I spent most of my childhood in Ilford, on the borders of Essex and East London. The area was extensively bombed during the Second World War but the library, a confident, neoclassical building constructed in the late 1920s, had survived. Inside, everything was neat, formal and quiet. Between the long wooden bookcases there were polished oak tables and old-fashioned upright chairs. The librarians went quietly and efficiently about their business amidst the comforting smell of paper, furniture polish and tobacco smoke. Solitude and privacy were the norm here. It was the polar opposite of my school, a small single-sex institution where I was frequently threatened, ridiculed and punished. At the library everything was gentle, polite and respectful. I felt safe.

I first visited the library alone when I was about twelve. I made a beeline for the psychology section. Surely I might find some answers here, I thought, some insight into my baffling condition. Maybe even a cure? At that stage, that was still my hope. Over a period of weeks I read many of the best-known writers in the field, including Freud and Jung but nothing struck a chord. People like me didn't seem to be in the books.

Then I came across Ronnie Laing, the radical Scottish psychiatrist and existential pioneer. Though Laing had nothing specific to say about kids like me, his 'big idea', that so-called 'mad' behaviour could be a natural, understandable response to an impossible situation, immediately resonated with me. Conflicted people didn't need medication or 'treatment', Laing seemed to be telling twelve-year-old me. They needed respect, space and empathy so that they could figure out who they really were. I didn't realise it at the time, but I had found my first humanistic 'guru'. There would be many more. A few years later I would listen to John Lennon's Plastic Ono Band, read Arthur Janov's *The Primal Scream*, and head for Los Angeles to experience his therapy first-hand. But that's another story.

Laing of course was dealing with schizophrenia and psychosis rather than gender identity, but still at twelve or thirteen I somehow felt I understood the people he was writing about. The way Laing framed it, their 'crazy' behaviour seemed to be explicable in terms of the situations in which they found themselves. Strange as it may seem now, the more I read, the more I started to envy Laing's patients their 'madness'. It seemed that they were being given space in which to honour something in themselves, to follow through on their personal odysseys. If only I could find a way to do the same. The only trouble was that I wasn't mad, and I knew it. Sometimes I hardly spoke for days, but no one thought I was catatonic, just shy. It was frustrating. Nobody noticed my struggle. I wrote a song, one of my first, which began, 'Just give me a chance to go crazy, and I'll stop this stupid game'.

Meanwhile, at school I passed my O-level exams two years early at 14, and was funnelled into doing Maths, Chemistry and Physics at A-level, in preparation for university and an academic career. I'd always passively complied with whatever was demanded of me at school, but reading Laing had begun to sow the seeds of a personal revolution. To my adolescent mind, Laing's patients were, through their refusal to conform, *resisting*

the expectations of those around them, and setting themselves free. I know now things were much more complex and nuanced than that, but back then I felt inspired; maybe I could defy my tormentors too?

The first time I deliberately missed a lesson, I encountered the headmaster in the corridor outside his office. He was a short, aggressive man with jet black greasy hair and deep-set eyes. He always spoke and moved abruptly, as if following orders from some invisible superior. He often lost control and became violent.

He confronted me. 'Shouldn't you be in a lesson, Maidman Two?' 'Yes sir. Maths.'

'Well you'd better go immediately and apologize for your bad manners and lateness', he said sharply. 'I don't want to go, sir.'

'What do you mean, you don't want to go? Don't be ridiculous. Of course you must go.'
'I'm not going, sir', I said as calmly as I could, though I was shaking inside. 'I don't like Maths.'

The headmaster turned bright red. I could tell he wanted to hit me, but he was also shocked. Nobody ever defied him like this. He struggled to contain his rage, and seemed to be hyperventilating. His shoulders moved up and down under his black, chalk stained cape. He looked like a large bird adjusting its feathers and trying to retain some dignity.

After a couple of seconds, he found his voice: 'You are a very, very rude boy', he spluttered.
Then at the top of his voice, almost screaming: 'And I don't like your etiquette!'

I said nothing. Then he stormed off into his office and slammed the door as loudly as he could.

It was a turning-point. I had proved to myself that if I stood my ground and stayed calm, there was nothing anyone could do about it. I too could resist, in my own way. Later that day, emboldened by my victory, and nourished by a lunchtime visit to the local chip shop, I decided to go and see my maths teacher, a kind and funny man who I liked very much. I can choose my own path, I thought. I don't *have* to do what's expected of me. I suppose I was discovering that most humanistic of processes, self-actualization, though I'd yet to come across the term.

I knocked gently on the staff room door. 'Come in.' The tiny room was thick with tobacco smoke. 'Sir, I'm sorry I didn't come to your lesson. I don't want to do Maths any more.'

'Don't be silly. You can't just stop. You have to do your A-levels.' 'But I don't like Maths, sir. Or Chemistry or Physics.'

'Well, you know those are the only subjects we can teach here.' 'Yes. I want to do music, sir.'

Out of the corner of my eye I could see my chemistry teacher, who was actually a fine amateur guitarist. He had been giving me lessons informally outside school hours. He was smiling very slightly.

'You know we don't teach music here.' 'Yes, sir.'

'Well then, I suppose we'll have to have a talk with your parents.' 'Yes, sir.'

A few weeks later I left my old school, the angry headmaster and the other bullies behind for ever. I was 15, and I'd been in that school from the age of six. In my new school I would be studying Music, Art and Drama at A-level.

And best of all, there would be girls.

Jennifer Maidman has performed musically with the likes of Joan Armatrading, Gerry Rafferty, David Sylvian, Robert Wyatt and Van Morrison; has written for Boy George and Sam Brown; and has produced albums for Paul Brady, Murray Head, Linda McCartney, and her partner Annie Whitehead. A key member of the original Penguin Café Orchestra, her 'Dreamland' album was released in 2017. Being involved with human potential work since the 1970s, Jennifer was formerly co-editor of *Self & Society*. A humanistic counsellor, she lives in Birchington, Kent, and in the mountains near Woodstock, Upstate New York. Website: www.jennifermaidman.com