

Review

‘Engaging Our Hearts in Dangerous Times’

A Humanistic Psychology Café Event:

Against Dialogue, *with* Manu Bazzano

Reflections by Lucy Scurfield

AHPb held the fourth of a series of low-cost humanistic café-style events in London at the Study Centre in Colet House, Hammersmith, on 17 July 2019. As with previous events we were warmly welcomed by the staff, and started with a bring-and-share supper.

Dr Dina Zohar Glouberman gave a brief overview of the history of Humanistic Psychology, relating its beginnings in offering a third way as an alternative to behavioural and Freudian psychology. This new approach brought the notion that we need to be found rather than healed. New experimental approaches were tried, with people learning from each other.

We were invited to start by going into groups of three and sharing something of ourselves as a way of leading into being comfortable for the remainder of the evening.

Zohar then introduced Manu Bazzano who is a practising psychotherapist, facilitator and author. He spoke on the theme ‘Against Dialogue’. His premise is clear in the following:

At the time of identity politics and polarization, we are told that we need more dialogue. He will present the case against dialogue and in favour of genuine encounter as poetic accident, creative conflict and deeper learning from difference and otherness.

Manu started by referring to mythologies. Ancient stories can be very meaningful, and one myth concerns dialogue. For example, in a poem from 500 BC, Apollo said part and parcel of being human is having contradictory thoughts. His sharp response is to get on with it, even though holding two contradictory thoughts is an unbearable burden.

Human beings would prefer to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The reality is that the human condition implies a split. One way to deal with this, according to Kierkegaard, is to have the courage to leap and make a decision – right/left, yes/no... – leap. The moment of leap is a moment of madness. Some avoid the unbearable contradiction by planning. Few have the courage of blind faith and instead, to unburden the split, seek another for dialogue in an attempt to relieve the unbearable sense of pain. This is the general premise of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Hegel had also understood that we cannot be ourselves unless we engage with another. However in this encounter alongside kinship/love eros, the agony of conflict/strife is crucial in shaping who we are. Ideally this is manifest in honest conflict. First there is the pain of unbearable being. Then the encounter involves strife.

Thirdly, there is according to Martin Buber the psychological sweet tune of ‘I thou’/‘I you’, as opposed to ‘I that’, with ‘that’ being the person related to as an object. It doesn’t happen intentionally; it’s an accident. For Buber I/thou was an expression of profound religiosity – an act of God or a miracle. However, like Kierkegaard before, others have removed the religiosity of this in a secular culture. Whatever the perspective, I/you can’t be maintained for long as it leads to burnout.

Hegel said that when we are born we are thrown deeply into an unjust world. ‘I’ am a subject. ‘I’ am subjugated. Becoming goes with being a subject [under].

This is not just because of class/ethnicity. As children we are dependent. The child in relationship is protected; life is regular.

Protection and regulation are two pillars of most societies. Subordination occurs because we need to be fed. Therefore there is the possibility of abuse, coercion with the subject under the protector. This is equally true of the therapeutic relationship. Currently there is an astronomic height of regulation. We are all regulated and controlled.

Indeed, the psychotherapeutic relationship cannot be the be-all and end-all – it’s part of something bigger called ‘affect’: we take on board different aspects of the intensity of life. Sadness and joy are the same thing, the difference between them is intensity.

In some psychotherapy trainings, understanding the relational aspect of intersubjectivity has become a given. It’s assumed we’re all interconnected in a particular field of relationship. We’ve forgotten that it’s an aspiration pushed aside. Actually, meeting can happen through love/conflict/competition/hatred.

A key question: If therapy ever reaches a place where possibility of destruction or conflict is

excluded, would it still be transformative? Is it possible to make a circle and push away blood, sweat and tears?

Psychotherapy has as an aim intersubjective practice in the service of transformation. If it is not to be a tool for social adaptation but for transformation, we need to face agony/conflict/strife within the self. ‘I’ is a multiplicity and is substantial vs oneness. The greater the struggle/fire, the more possibility of change.

We are not free. We can engage with each other in a free exchange and hope for acceptance of the multiplicity of who we are.

What would it take to accept the unbearable nature of who we are? Some would say it’s a matter of humility. This is not in a pious sense, but rather ‘I don’t know who I am’. There may be alien parts to me. So the alternative to wishy-washy dialogue is genuine and terrifying experience of our difference, and accepting that I haven’t got a clue about who I am/you are. Importantly, ‘you’ are another person. To move outside the narcissistic sphere is very difficult. So-called dialogue/intersubjectivity includes narcissism. I engage in dialogue with you because I recognize you, which will confirm and improve my own sense of self.

As individuals we need to recognize ourselves as a composite self – neurosis [form of]. Me unsplit is benevolent neurosis.

Implications for the Therapist

They need to be open enough for subversion. Labels can be a masque. The therapist is working in favour of transformation. In the life of a person is the individual person motivated by reactive forces?

James Hillman said that suicide should be explored without prejudice. Most people say it’s a bad thing.

The therapist must be willing to encounter rupture. This can’t be with I/thou. The ultimate aim of the therapist is the autonomy of the client, allowing the latter’s free speech to unfold in an atmosphere of neutrality or openness and be affected to engage with their power. The more open I am, the more

powerful I can become. In this there is sustained intensity without destruction.

About the contributor

Lucy Scurfield is Chair of the AHPb and an IPN-recognized therapist living in Norwich, UK. She founded the pioneering charity Strong Roots – see <http://www.strongroots.org.uk/>.