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Cultivating Reverence during Dark Times

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ENGULFED IN CRISIS

Many days now I feel invaded,
colonised by,
taken over and undone by
the latest piece of terrible news.

My thoughts go to the nightmares
as I hover between sleep and wake,
and wish I was asleep and it was only that
– a weird dream.
And during the day I struggle
to refocus my mind on the task in hand.[1]

(Wright, 2022)

It can be hard to speak in difficult times, as well as difficult to hear. The voice of trauma, even when whispered, can hurt the speaker and the listener.

Sinason, 2020, pp. ix, x

Our world is turning upside down and inside out as we enter a time of multiple interlocking crises – environmental disasters, talk of a third world war, economic crises that intensify pre-existing inequalities, thousands of displaced people seeking refuge, increasing polarisation and a crisis of morality in public life. Our foundations are being rocked to the core. It is a time of *Zeitenwende*,[2] a turning of epochs; and how we respond to this as individuals and as psychotherapists is critical. The words people use when naming the crises are many and varied. So, too, are the views on how they have come about. But at the heart of these many languages is a dawning awareness that humankind has lost its way. In our pursuit of progress, our urge to protect what we have, and our narcissistic sense of entitlement, we have lost reverence and respect for others, for the earth and its creatures, and for ourselves and our bodies (Feldman, 1990, p. 49). We have become disconnected, caught up in addictive sensation-seeking patterns and tribalist mentalities (Weintrobe, 2020; Lammy, 2020; Greenfield, 2008; Hollway, 2022). We have taken things for granted and ignored the inevitability of loss and death. And all this is at tremendous cost.[3]

Bertolt Brecht, a poet who was deeply sensitive to living in a crumbling society, captured the complexity of living in dark times – times when resorting to denial and dissociation makes absolute sense because facing terrible news overwhelms us (1939).

Truly I live in dark times!
Frank speech is naïve. A smooth forehead
Suggests insensitivity. The man who laughs
Has simply not yet heard
The terrible news.

What kind of times are these, when
To talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?
When the man over there calmly crossing the street
Is already perhaps beyond the reach of his friends

Who are in need?

We like to distance, put off a threat, cling to a slightly comfortable albeit guilty feeling that a crisis is over there. Not here. Or that much worse things are likely to happen, but not yet, not for a long time. We distance in our 'business as usual'. Who would not prefer to talk about the blossom starting to show on the trees in his garden rather than acknowledge the number of trees felled in the rainforests every minute? Who does not calmly cross the street and conveniently forget the scenes just shown on television of a man staring at the rubble of his house struck by a mortar in war-torn Mariupol, and on another continent streets inundated with water after yet another flood? Yet the warnings of dark times ahead occur with increasing frequency.

In another poem Brecht vividly captured the paradox I often encounter in the space of a few minutes when I see or hear things that bring horror and sadness, then notice something else that brings delight and joy (Brecht, nd).

> Inside me contend
> delight at the apple tree in blossom
> and horror at the house painter's speeches.
> But only the second
> drives me to my desk.[4]

There is evidence every day of the loss of our familiar world. But for much of the time the environment around us carries on in its predictable seasonal way. I feel delight seeing spring flowers emerging and the signs of birds preparing for nesting. I feel reassured by the signs of sheep shearing, and after this the smell of fresh cut hay, the familiar seasonal rhythms of my farming neighbours. I savour the taste of garden peas, newly dug potatoes and field mushrooms. When I soak in these sensory details, details I know in my bones, it's hard to believe that in the last few years there have been so many devastating storms, floods, unprecedented heat waves and bush fires, and to take in the dire predictions of well over 2-degree temperature rises by the 2050s and the extent of deforestation and glacial melt. I notice how pleased (and relieved?) I feel when I hear of an almost extinct species being reported in significant numbers again, like the Bittern in UK wetlands in March 2022,[5] and a range of animals that are appearing in number once more in areas of the Sierra Nevada in Mexico – another paradox here being that these mountains were used to test the atomic bomb (Solnit, 2006, pp. 202–4). Holding these glimmers of hope in the one hand and, in the other, the staggering numbers of plants and animals that have vanished in my lifetime is not easy. But holding the tensions is what we have to do, over and over again. And it is horror that repeatedly drives me to my desk to write.

As we face the dying of our familiar world and a future in which it seems inevitable that environmental catastrophes will increase in intensity and frequency, what can psychotherapists offer? How can we use our skills to support others to imagine the unimaginable, and grieve the loss of the future they had anticipated? What resources can we draw upon and share with others to hear the things that hurt, to witness things that shock us, and to find courage to speak out when we need to? And – a fundamental question – what is needed to rediscover a sense of community, care, and something more holistic and soulful?

Reverence

> Enjoy the earth gently
> for if the earth is spoiled
> it cannot be repaired.
> Enjoy the earth gently.
> (Yoruba poem from West Africa)

The vision I want to share here is of cultivating reverence, and I believe this should run through all we do, not just how we are in our therapy rooms. Reverence is not a word ever used on the many training courses I have attended, and it is not easy to define. It encompasses appreciation – both of beauty and of the finitude of things. As the philosopher Paul Woodruff argued, 'reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control – God, truth, justice, nature, even death' (2001, p. 3). Christina Feldman said something similar when she pointed out that

words often used to describe the spiritual dimension such as wholeness, oneness, connectedness and awakening are about 'a way of living that is an expression of reverence. It is a way of being that reveres the sacredness and dignity of all life, honours our earth, and appreciates the implications of our fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness.' (1990, p. 49)

Reverence also encompasses the idea of care, and in particular trying to do what we do in a sacred way. Without reverence, Woodruff pointed out, 'things fall apart' (2001, p. 4). We try to act like gods, the 'Entitled Self' powerfully described by Sally Weintrobe (2020). 'Without reverence we cannot explain why we should treat the natural world with respect. Without reverence, a house is not a home, a boss is not a leader, an instructor is not a teacher.' (Woodruff, p. 13) We could also add that without reverence, people become 'cases' and 'statistics'. We lose sight of their uniqueness and the many contexts that have shaped them.

Without reverence we also fail to see the unique flora and fauna in the places where we live. We desacralise the natural world, treating it as an ever-giving source of sustenance and profit (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 128). As the Yoruba poem urges, we need to 'enjoy the earth gently'. Feldman emphasised that the degree to which we can connect with our world, empathise and extend sensitivity is linked with the extent to which we can connect with ourselves. 'Our relationship to our own being is a microcosm of every other relationship' (1990, p. 51). And in the clinical setting our ears need to be acutely attuned to the language people use about care – their experiences of care or uncare, how valued they feel, how they care for themselves, and what if anything gives them a sense of awe and appreciation.

Let me give an example. Whilst writing this article someone I have worked with for a long time spoke in incredible distress about the ugliness of the world. She had been triggered by watching something on YouTube that had gone viral – a programme in which a man acted out his intention to globally humiliate his partner. 'It was vile', she said. 'How can people do this? How can it be allowed? I don't want to be part of the world if it's like this.' Like others who speak in overt and covert ways about the dark times we live in, this tapped into earlier stories. Lucy had been shamed throughout her childhood. She was an inconvenience as a girl and the last of four children and, never being treated with care and reverence, Lucy had disconnected from and harmed her body from an early age. As I heard her distress, and noted how appalled I felt hearing about the video, I reflected how disturbed Lucy felt by what is going on in the world, and how she seemed to have lost faith in everything. She agreed, and spoke in graphic language about people starving and corruption and the 'grown-ups, even the nice ones, not doing anything'. For her the world seemed upside down 'with evil on top'. Contacting all this was crucial. But then I suggested that right now, perhaps the important thing was to care for herself, adding that in caring for ourselves we are caring for others and all living things because we're part of nature. 'If we treat ourselves in an ugly way, that's how we treat others, because we're not separate.' Lucy got this, and said that knowing she can do small things to improve the world gave her hope. Later that day she emailed a photograph of a Japanese *kintsugi* bowl. 'I've stuck a copy of it on to my fridge to remind me', she wrote. The simple beauty of the blue and gold bowl seemed to suggest that our work had helped her to appreciate that even what is 'imperfect' deserves to be treated in sacred ways.

How can our way of living and working as psychotherapists, using Feldman's words, be 'an expression of reverence'?. One of the things I valued when training as a Sensorimotor therapist was the way this approach is grounded in five key principles: non-violence, organicity, mindfulness, mind–body–spirit holism and unity in a participatory universe.[6] Non-violence is essential if therapy is to be an act of reverence. A non-violent approach is grounded in respect for the uniqueness of each person – Buber's 'I–thou' relationship and unconditional positive regard come to mind – and demands going with the grain, letting go of agendas, and staying compassionate and curious.[7] The principle of

mindfulness helps us to be fully present, in touch with the flow of experience, accepting, not judging.

Meanwhile the principles of organicity, holism and unity resonate with the idea of living in co-operation and in harmony with nature. They acknowledge wholeness within and around us. As Teilhard d'Chardin said, 'Each element of the cosmos is positively woven from all the others…. It is impossible to cut into this network, to isolate a portion without its becoming frayed and unravelled at all its edges' (Myullerup-Brookhuis, 2008, p. 73), and this captures our present predicament. Society is fraying and unravelling at its edges, like a beautiful piece of woven cloth, once treasured, now threatened with being discarded. And we have become so divorced from ourselves – the holism of our bodies, minds, emotions and soul – that many people feel frayed (unwell, exhausted, depressed) or are emotionally unravelling (overwhelmed, falling to bits, feeling crazy). In cutting and isolating – our left-brain tendency to categorise and label – we end up treating ecological and social problems in singular rather than holistic ways.[8] We have lost touch with organicity – the knowledge that all living systems move towards inter-relational flow and wholeness when unhindered.[9] As Iain McGilchrist (2009) argued, in the Western world the left brain has become the Master. It is a master who holds no court with the sacred, the mystical, the emotional or the intricacies of connections.

Ritual

> Rituals can regenerate life by giving it meaning and purpose.
>
> Eliade, 1949, in Woodcock, 2021, p. 99

Going back to the question I raised earlier about how we can use our skills in the future and stay courageous, the Hakomi principles can act as an ethical compass. But a therapy of reverence is also embedded in ritual. Ritual is another word not in therapeutic discourse. We speak instead of the frame, and know how essential it is for establishing a sense of safety. It is one of the formal aspects of psychotherapy – the contract, the routine of regular appointments, the setting in which we work.

Alongside this outer frame is the therapist's inner frame, an internal space for reflecting and symbolising. Jaron argued that this should be able to function irrespective of the outer context (2021, p. 220), and this depends on the ongoing reflective work we do on our own process. But in such a rapidly changing world when rarely a day passes without news of something horrific occurring at local and global levels, how sturdy is our inner frame? When, like our clients, we live with a sense of ever-present threat and feel overwhelmed, shocked and grief-stricken, it can be challenging to regulate and process our emotional responses so that we are still able to provide a sturdy container.

In ordinary circumstances our lives are patterned by a predictable routine. This is our outer frame, our ground-bass, and it helps to generate a sense of safety. The idiosyncratic 'rituals' and ways of doing things that evolve with each person, couple or group with whom we work offer a similar ground-bass. They are part of the glue of the therapeutic relationship and are important to sustain, as the breaks to our normal routine during the periods of lockdown in 2020 highlighted. Rituals, as Stuart-Smith pointed out, are important because they bring a sense of order to situations that are uncertain or precarious. 'They alleviate anxiety, affirm shared values, and enhance group bonding' (2020, p. 119). However a ritual without reverence is a performance. It lacks depth and relational intensity.

With that in mind, I wonder how different our approach to our work might be if we thought of maintaining the frame as like conducting a Japanese Tea Ceremony? The stages in this traditional ceremony echo traditional rites of passage in other communities. On arrival, the participants remove their shoes and wash their hands to symbolically cleanse off the dust of the outside world. The utensils are cleaned using carefully choreographed gestures. Bows are exchanged. The first guest is given a bowl of tea. He or she takes a sip, compliments the host and passes it on to the next guest. At the end, all the

objects are purified and with more bows the guests depart. The slowness, simplicity and respectful attention to others, the utensils and what is consumed – all being parts of a whole – capture the essence of my vision of a therapy of reverence. All the senses are involved. The ceremony is also an event in parentheses. The preparations engaged in before beginning and departing delineate it from the tasks and concerns of everyday life, and this is an element of the therapeutic frame that we risk losing sight of. I became aware of this when working remotely for the first time during the pandemic. Zooming may offer benefits, but something gets missed. We can work up to the wire. I don't have to give so much attention to how the room looks or to what I'm wearing.[10] And the same is true for my clients. During the periods of lockdown, some talked nostalgically about missing the journey. Others often 'arrived' (and in a remote context this means logging in) in a rush, and needed time to settle before they could really focus on themselves.

Silence

> What will the quality of silence be in the age after Time when the feasting and fighting is over?

My second example highlights the intertwined nature of the outer and the inner frames and the significance of the ritual aspects of a therapeutic process. It is drawn from my work supervising a group of therapists who run a community art project. As part of our preparation we start each session with a period of mindfulness, a chance to arrive and check our inner responses to the immediate context. On one occasion, having followed what was figural – the sunlight and one woman's concern about the intense heat in her home country – I ended the meditation with two questions: 'If you had your own little patch of land, what would you be doing to protect it and ensure that it is a safe, welcoming, thriving place?' Then, connecting the wider field with their work and the space they have created, I asked, 'and what do you do that makes this a safe, welcoming, thriving place?'. The women's responses were interesting. They highlighted the need for time, support from others, a shared vision and for enough distance in which to really see. 'With no distance', one said, 'we just do, do, do.'

I have always respected the reverent way these therapists prepare everything, from beautiful leaflets about the project, to flowers on the tables, pictures on the walls, and delicate hand-made boxes to hold necessary resources. I respect the time they devote to their work and the welcome they give to all who come to them for support. In the supervision sessions I have also endeavoured to offer a space carved out of time for slowing down, sharing and holding difficult things. It has been a place where they could think together about the strains of running a charity, as well as their individual responses to living in a troubled world and the complexities of juggling work and family demands. In this particular session I noticed the yearning for more space, and simplicity in other aspects of their lives. I also noted the parallels that came up for me.

The theme of longing is a recurrent one in my conversations with many people I have worked with over the last few years. They yearn for something different – to live somewhere quieter where they can be creative and feel calmer. They crave silence, a simpler way of being, to have a sense of belonging within a community and to feel more in touch with the land. It is not that their lives are bad, whatever was missing in the past. Yet they are caught up in the relentless tide of 'do, do, do' – emails to respond to, the needs of others, the pressures of work and, for some, the additive distractions and strategies they have evolved in order not to feel or think too much. It is possible that I catch subtle variations in the songs they sing that might be inaudible to others because of projecting my own needs here. But I believe that the yearning for something radically different is one manifestation of the extent to which humankind has lost its way, and the grief felt, but often unarticulated, about the destruction of our natural home.

When writing about people longing for a slower, quieter way of being, I thought of the Welsh word for silence, *tawelwch.* It is an interesting word because it is composed of *taw*, to put an end to, and *elwych*, feasting (Wynn Thomas,

2021, p. 5), and one of the earliest surviving Welsh poems – a narrative about the failed attempt of a small army of Welshmen to defeat Germanic invaders – captures the contrast between the din of the feast before the heroic band set off and the silence after their defeat. The silence of death, of the grief of those left behind, and perhaps of futility?

We could see the poem as an allegory about Modern Man. We have feasted gluttonously on the fruits of the earth and anaesthetised ourselves with fine wines. We strode out confidently, as I imagine the 300 soldiers did back in the seventh century, intent on discovering, conquering, advancing. But the cost, we are now discovering and as the final lines of the poem poignantly capture, is of a very bitter after-taste. 'Glow of wine in candle flame, Sweet the taste, the aftertaste bitter' (p. 3). We need silence – away from the habitual 'chattering' of our minds and the 'noise' of so much sensory stimulation. We need it in order to truly notice the world around us and to find ourselves. Silence offers an opportunity to observe, reflect and allow meanings to emerge.

Wherever we find ourselves working in the future – in hospitals, schools, at the edge of a battlefield, our homes or outside somewhere – can we reverently create a space away from the 'din' of the world where the unarticulated can be expressed and new meanings be found? This is the challenge.

Notes

1 I wrote this poem in early 2022 when I realised that my mind was consumed with thoughts and worries about my elderly mother, who was suddenly no longer able to cope, about the savage storms that had hit the UK the previous month, and about the war that had just been declared in the Ukraine. I could not shake the images and fears out of my head, nor the feelings of grief that hit me when I heard about the impact of these tragedies through the words of those most affected.

2 Chancellor Scholtz used this term in December 2021 and again in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine when reflecting on the historical weight of what we are living through now.

3 The history of this stretches back centuries as homo sapiens has advanced as I discuss elsewhere (Wright, 2020; 2021; forthcoming.

4 The house-painter is a veiled reference to Hitler.

5 In 1997 it was estimated that there were only eleven male Bitterns across the entire UK. In 2021, 228 males were counted. Investment in wetland creation and conservation has also led to the return of other species like cranes, spoonbills, little egrets and great egrets, and plays a part in carbon capture. As one senior conservation scientist said, 'Nature can bounce back, given a chance'.

6 The Hakomi principles draw on Zen Buddhism, Gregory Bateson's propositions about the characteristics of all living systems, non-linear dynamic systems theory and contemporary neuroscience (Kurtz, 1990; Myullerup-Brookhuis, 2008).

7 See, too, Donna Orange on Levinas' non-violent stance (2011, p. 56).

8 The same is true of physical and emotional problems – a tendency that therapists risk aligning with because we feel a pressure to do something.

9 The dominance of Descartian philosophy has played a big part in this.

10 Even though no one visited the space for weeks, it felt important to still have a jug of flowers in my room – an acknowledgement of the 'sacredness' of the space.

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She specialises in working with the survivors of complex trauma. Sue is currently working on a book that reflects on how the crises of today's rapidly changing world are impacting us as individuals and therapists, and explores how we can stay resilient and courageous and support others whatever comes next.