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TRUTH AND TRANSCENDENCE PODCAST INTERVIEW

Power With, and Getting to 'Yes'

Denis Postle is interviewed by Catherine Llewellyn

Podcast liner notes to the interview
(by Catherine Llewellyn)

Denis Postle is a film-maker, author, group facilitator, therapist, practitioner supervisor, musician and founder of the Independent Practitioner Network (IPN). He has directed over 30 TV films and written and published five books.

Denis is currently working on his forthcoming film *Difficult Times: The Curse of Dominion* – being 'an essay exploring the roots of the Climate Emergency and its trajectory'.

I was a supervisory client of Denis's for over 15 years. His grasp of the humanistic philosophy and his wise and skilful supervision helped me enormously in the evolving of my own practice. One of the strong threads we explored together is power. Power Over – Power With – and how our individual relationship with power is crucial to our ability to lead others both effectively and humanely.

Over the past couple of years the exercise of power has been a hot topic. We each have our own opinions and viewpoints about how this has played out. For leaders wishing to be 'part of the solution' to current global and local issues, 'Power With' is a hugely important notion.

Where to find Denis:

https://denis.postle.net
https://www.youtube.com/c/DenisPostle/videos

Catherine Llewellyn

Catherine Llewellyn [CL] – *Introduction:* Truth and Transcendence, episode 60 with special guest Denis Postle. Denis is a film-maker, an author, a group facilitator, a therapist, a practitioner supervisor, a musician and founder of the Independent Practitioner Network. He has directed over 30 TV films and written and published five books.

Denis is currently working on his forthcoming film, *Difficult Times: The Curse of Dominion*, an essay exploring the roots of the climate emergency and its trajectory. So that promises to be an interesting and possibly provocative offering coming out at some point. To quote Denis himself,

> looking back over the years, I seem to have been catapulted from a northern steel town childhood into the London media elite as a film director, a classic outsider immigrant, struggling to ride the dominant UK Oxbridge private-education nexus. While this migrant status tends to amputate belonging, it has given me an activist perspective on the internal dynamics of normality, especially love and the love of power. I also came to see how managerial TV roles tended to outlaw intuition and innovation, and a couple of key decisions enabled me to pivot away from it to the oral culture of personal growth, group facilitation and human-condition work.

And Denis says that his deepest satisfactions are wives and partners, children and grandchildren, the privilege of human-condition client work, decades of community sharing, music, photography, movie-making, and feeling entitled to independently make sense of life and the world.

So this is not a boring man that I've invited on; but I also have a personal connection with Denis. I was a supervisory client of Denis's for over 15 years, and I found his grasp of the humanistic philosophy that, as you know, I'm very keen on, and his wise and skilful supervision, helped me enormously in the evolving of my own practice. And one of the strong threads we explored together is power – power *over* and power *with* – and we're going to talk about *power with* today, and how our individual relationship with power is crucial to our ability to lead others, both effectively and humanely.

So just a few more words from me before I welcome Denis. This idea of *power with* – over the past couple of years, the exercise of power has been a hot topic. I think we can all agree on that, and we each have our own opinions and viewpoints about how this is played out. And my feeling is that for leaders wishing to be part of the solution to the current global and local issues, *power with* is a hugely important notion.

So, that's quite a long introduction today, but I felt this particular guest warranted that. And I'm really delighted, Denis, that you were able to take the time to come and join us on the 'Truth and Transcendence' podcast.

Denis Postle [**DP**]: – oh, you're welcome.

CL: So just going straight into it: when, if you think back, Denis, when did you first notice that power was an important topic for you?

DP: Okay! Well, which and where?... I think it was when I began to get involved and become a film director. I started off as a graphic designer; and why did I stop being a graphic designer? – because I could have had a heavy-duty career as a graphic designer. But it became clear that being a graphic designer meant that you were in effect subservient, or a servant of somebody else's content. Which is a kind of power relationship. It's not a bad one, but it's one that I thought, 'Oh yes, that's not going to work for me'. Because I'd always tended to be opinionated about one thing and another. And somebody else's content was going to be tricky. Anyway, so I was moved, one way or another, to become a film director.

And being a film director has been, and still is, a potentially dominant form of work in the sense that you direct the project, you direct the film, by and large. Directors are co-operative to the degree to which there are producers who keep an eye on it or who specify things; but by and large, once it starts, you are it. When you're being a director on anything of any size, one's being assailed by people asking, 'How do we do this? Tell me how to do that?... Where do we do this? What do you mean by that?' Endless questions that need a single answer from one person.

And so that's a kind of… well I wouldn't say it was 'power over', but it is slightly authoritarian in nature. It is a hierarchical position, really, in that it doesn't work otherwise. I've actually made one video which was completely collective, and in which everybody had a say throughout. And that was really very problematic because of the sheer amount of time it took, and the amount of energy and attention that a group of 12 or 15 people needed, to be able to take part.

So with hierarchy, it's not as if it's wrong – but that's when I became clear that there was an issue about power. The first one – the first of which was where I was working... – as a production trainee, as opposed to just a director. The trade union there wouldn't let us do anything. So power subtly emerged. *Ding*.

CL: What do you mean, they wouldn't let you do anything?

DP: Well, we were production trainees and they – the film trade union at that time – insisted that people who were going to do work in the industry were going to come from within the industry. And we'd been parachuted in – four of us. There was a power issue for some time, to the point where I quit that work, I quit that job. I quit that place because... – I think it was quite legitimate. Their concerns were legitimate, but they played out in a way that was, after a couple of years of that… – I just wasn't going to continue.

So I don't know if that's helping you. But then *power with* emerged when I moved eventually to the BBC. BBC 2 television started and they were looking for people, and I applied the week before it was a public kind of advertising. And their *power with* was much, much clearer.

It was a creatively very open thing to be doing, in that I was asked to contribute what I knew. And at the same time, however, there was still directing and eventually... – I think if I jump from this, because then otherwise it's not necessarily on your theme; but if I jump further on from this, there was a question later as a director where people wanted me to be 'heavy'.

To be a director, you had to shout and order people about. And my style as a director – paradoxically a hierarchical role – my style was to be co-operative, caring and completely consultative about it. And I think, without too much inflation, I became known as somebody with that reputation.

Which, if you like, is, *power with*, because a team of people then necessarily needs to be led, because that's what we're doing. But at the same time, everything needs to be checked out, consulted with, consulted about and so on.

CL: This is very interesting, Denis. The people who wanted you to be what you called a 'heavy' director – the sort of the archetype of the bellowing director. I actually had a friend for many years who was a first assistant director, and he *was* that kind of director. He was an American with a sort of rich Bronx accent, and he would bellow at everybody and storm about – that was his particular signature. But I do remember it put an awful lot of pressure on him. He would come out of it absolutely exhausted. And other people as well would sometimes feel kind of crushed, because they couldn't cope with the intensity of it all. And he was actually quite a difficult person to be around. He was a good person, but difficult to be around because that sort of persona kind of flooded out into everything. So I can completely see the difference between those styles. But the people who wanted you to be the heavy style of director – why did they want you to do that?

DP: Well, because they wanted me to *make it happen*! They'd say, 'This is very slow and it's going to be a bit more expensive'. And it was Friday night, on the last day of the shoot. And we still had three hours to go, and that was going to be overtime – *make it happen, make it happen*. There was the kind of pressure to 'get them to…!' – this kind of talk coming down the phone, and from elsewhere. It was coercion, which *is* partly legitimate; but the point that people in that situation often didn't understand was that I didn't have any choice. What did we do? We just stop and come back a week later? – absolutely impossible…. Anyone directing films on any sort of scale would know this. There's a tremendous tension between cost and everything else.

CL: I think anyone in charge of a large project, or running a business even, has experienced something similar to what you're describing here. I've heard many people tell me that they're trying to work collaboratively with their people and then, then they've got someone from head office or someone from the holding company in Switzerland or Canada or wherever it is, shouting at them to just whip people into shape and get something done quickly….

DP: *Get it done*! Yes, Yes.

CL: When people on the ground know that they're actually working with human beings, they don't want to do that with those people and they don't think it's going to work. So that's interesting that you already then had that more co-operative style. At that time, had you had any sort of involvement with the humanistic approach, or anything like that?

DP: No, I hadn't. And I think, in a way, that's maybe an amusing sideline on this. Reflectively, this is my perspective, you understand, of the co-operative approach – no doubt about that. But back in the office, I discovered later that I was known as 'The Baron'. One has to be careful about self-perception! That wasn't my self-image at all; but some of the people saw me as constantly knowing what I needed, how to do it, etc. I was very determined and settled, and so on.

CL: Yes. So you had clarity in yourself.

DP: Clarity is a good word, yes. This gets up some people's noses.

CL: Well, exactly. Especially if they don't have clarity about what *they're* doing.

DP: Yes, yes!

CL: By comparison – it's 'How dare you be so clear about what you're trying to do!'.

DP: Yes. But I think that just because I thought I was being co-operative and was working in that direction doesn't necessarily mean it was perceived as such by other people.

CL: And I think there lies the rub, actually, for many of us: we can in a self-satisfied fashion come back to our partner or our friend or whatever, and say, 'I was really co-operative today and this was great'. And then go back in the next day and discover that somebody really didn't feel that way at the time!

DP: Yes – exactly.

CL: Really interesting! I had no idea about all of that because I met you years later after you were not doing that. I was quite surprised when I learned that you'd been a film director, when you first told me, because it seemed like such a change of profession. But it sounds like even back then, you were already noticing that there was something different about your approach from that of the other people doing similar work. It sounds like you were being drawn in a different direction.

DP: Yes. And I think part of a limitation on that career, to some degree, was that I didn't do the heavy-handed, loud and more assertive, domineering kind of approach in terms of finding work and so forth. I didn't do it in part for reasons of history, I think, as well.

CL: What do you mean by 'reasons of history'?

DP: Well, I think as you said earlier in the bio, I 'parachuted in', in a space of really quite a short while, from being the son of a working-class dad in the north of England, who could read and write; but my dad – if he needed to, he couldn't and didn't write letters. You'd have to get somebody else to write a letter for him. And I catapulted from that household to being a director in the BBC in a very short time.

And as for the model of power in relation to my father; they wanted him to be the charge-hand where he worked – and he wouldn't do it. He couldn't do it. He wasn't going to do it because it would've meant being in power. And so my model of power just wasn't very strong – there wasn't much of it.

CL: I completely understand.

DP: Yes. So I suddenly found myself in the BBC, which at that time was a great place, creatively speaking. Wonderful. But it was full of people all elbowing each other, absolutely all the time – for a project, for influence, for status and so forth. And I don't think I was that good at that.

CL: Well, it sounds like it didn't really appeal to you, either.

DP: No, it doesn't, and it didn't – no. I'm a maker, really. A maker. I make stuff. And….

CL: Well, I just think that something very interesting that comes out of what you've been saying there is that question of recognising whether or not a particular culture speaks to us. Whether it feels like the kind of culture that we resonate with and that we feel drawn to, or not. And I think that's a very important thing for any of us to tune into, because otherwise we can find ourselves just drawn along in a culture that we're accepting because everyone else is accepting it, or we think we *ought to* accept it.

But actually there's always the possibility that we don't have to do that. We can choose to operate differently within it, which it sounds like you were doing; but we can also choose to step away from it, which I think is what you ultimately did.

DP: Yes. Well, there was an interim phase in which, together with half a dozen other people, we formed a co-operative film production company, which was probably a decade or more ahead of the time when there was a market for it – which we hadn't noticed, being naive, creative people; we hadn't really noticed. The only market was for music videos. And one of the partners was very successful at that, and the company prospered; but the rest of us didn't – there just wasn't a market for independent productions at that time.

CL: Not like there is now.

DP: Exactly. And in terms of *power with*, you see, that was a non-hierarchical organisation, ultimately of five people who did all kinds of stuff. Among other things, everybody would've seen that 'Imagine', John Lennon's 'Imagine' video – well, that was done from our office!

CL: Amazing! I had no idea….

DP: No. Well my partner Nick did almost all the filming for John Lennon, for a long time.

CL: Amazing.

DP: So, we did really well, but there wasn't a market for the kind of production I was interested in.

CL: Well, I think many of us can say similar things, Denis. We, the innovative ones among us, will tend to often tune into things that are before their time – won't we?

DP: Yes. Well, I think that certainly was the case. It was way ahead of what was practical. In terms of business – we did think that we did do things, but it wasn't enough.

CL: But I actually tend to think that when people do that sort of thing, when it's ahead of its time, I think that in itself helps the thing become something later, that someone's got to be first doing the new thing, don't they? And the first person may not make any money out of it, or may have a difficult time; but I think that helps pave the way for the people who come after – who can then embrace it.

That's so fascinating, that early connection with noticing different things around power, and how you felt in relation to those. And also how other people were behaving in relation to those things. I know that over time, you've really honed and fine-tuned your understanding of what *power over* and *power with* actually are. Could you tell us a bit more about how you explored that more fully, and how that's emerged more?

DP: Yes well, it was an extremely clear kind of pivot-point, you could say. I was really interested in making a film about stress. So I researched stress, and I showed up at Charing Cross Hospital (London) one day at an alternative medicine conference; and there was this guy on the stage who was extraordinary eloquent, talking about all of these matters. This was John Heron.

CL: Oh yes, the great John Heron!

DP: And I thought, oh – this is very interesting; I'll talk to him. So to cut a long story short, I gravitated and drifted towards working with him and his work. It was a medical education at the time – radical, very radical medical education – and to make a film about that. I then discovered another universe! – firstly, through a lot of chatting with him. Oh – and that film's still available, by the way. [See Denis's article in *Self & Society*, vol. 50 (1–2), 2022, pp. 31–4: 'John Heron and Medical Education' – ed.] I can give you addresses for that. I actually refurbished the film recently, but it's a very generic piece about what practitioners of almost any kind, but particularly medical, psychological or people who work with people, could do with knowing about.

What I discovered then was co-counselling and Humanistic Psychology. And groups. It's not as if I'd never been in a group. Films... – film-making is a group activity. Suddenly this became extraordinarily interesting, and I realised that – wow! – this was *way* more interesting than making films! I was still doing film work, though. We spent a million pounds on a series about science and society, which we were pretty sure was only really being done so as to ensure that the company got their license fee renewed.

CL: So it was a virtue-signalling?

DP: Yes, virtue – following which, they didn't want to do a second series. So that was a kind of 'No', on the one hand and, and a big 'Yes' nearby – if that makes sense.

CL: Completely. It does – of course.

DP: Of course it did, without going into it, lead to a pretty threadbare time. I did still do various kinds of film work for which I could get paid – just to keep life going; but I gradually moved to training with the Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP), as a groupwork facilitator – particularly via John Heron and Anne Dixon and various other people. This was a transition to – for me – *power with*.

CL: Yes, amazing. Well, thank goodness that you actually went along to that conference and met John. I've actually mentioned John Heron a couple of times in other episodes of this podcast series. And I've mentioned you in a couple of episodes as well, Denis! I've always been a great fan of John Heron myself – it was John who was instrumental in creating the master's degree I did back in the 1990s.

DP: Oh yes, of course – right.

CL: For which I'm ever, ever grateful.

DP: At the University of Surrey?

CL: That's right.

So, I'd just like to ask you now to share a bit more, in a bit more depth, about the distinction between *power over* and *power with*, and what that means; and some of the learning about that that you've explored over time; because there'll be some people listening to this, thinking – 'I understand what's meant by those terms, and the distinction between them'. But maybe other people listening will be thinking, 'What do you mean by those terms?'.

DP: Well, perhaps we'll park this for later; but because we live in what I would regard as a kind of dominion-based culture… – a *power over* culture…. Then looking at it, seeing the alternatives of *power with* tend to either be very vague or indistinct, or people just don't get it.

CL: Oh, you mean because what they're accustomed to is the *power-over* model. So that *power with* seems not as accessible or easy to see.

DP: Exactly; because it's predominantly, it seems to me – and these are opinions – a dominion-based culture that we have. And worldwide, too – *globally*, not just in Europe. Anyway, for me, *power with* is equal to love. You see for me, *power with* is another way of talking about love. In the past I – you could call it 'research' – but anyway, it was me just digging around in order to get off of the magical ideas about love, into something much more specific.

As far as I'm concerned, love is pursuing the flourishing of the Other, or Others, only, and preferably mutually. And being in love: well, there are also physical, physiological aspects, and so on and so forth. But in a *sustained* sense – this for me, then, is how I understand *power with*. For me, *power with* is the seeking of the flourishing of the people around you, and in principle, finding that it comes back. And that's something that can actually be done, as opposed to just thought about or wished for. Do you see what I mean?

CL: You mean, you can choose actions based on that?

DP: Yes, what I wrote and blogged about some time ago – 'living from love'. With this definition, for me it's the core of my understanding about *power with*.

CL: Right; great. Well, that makes sense to me. And I think I understand that distinction you're talking about between the magical idea of love, which can be a very vague, non-specific thing, and how *power with* helps us find a more specific connection with the notion of helping others, wanting others to flourish and helping others to flourish. And then you said that's something you can actually *do*. Could you say a bit more about that? – so that again, people listening can get their arms around it a bit.

DP: Yes. So this is where the junction with *power over* emerges – because, say, in a relationship: is our attitude to the other person that of seeking their flourishing? Do we do that? Yes – and in enabling them so far as we're able to, but not in a way that's in any sense controlling. So it may involve feedback – for example, 'You don't seem to realise that when you do that, I feel pissed off'. Which might be an aid to their flourishing, even though they at that point might not agree.

CL: It might be uncomfortable.

DP: Yes – but by and large, it's an attitude to the other and to others – and that then shapes any kind of action.

CL: Well, I think it's the shaping of the action that is often the rub, because I've been in so many situations where – well, whether it's myself or whether it's somebody else, firmly believing that they want the flourishing of the other person, and yet their actions may be quite controlling – even though inside themselves, they want the other person's flourishing.

DP: They may well have believed they wanted it, but did they *do* it? The question is, does it actually come out?

CL: And I think there's a big kind of mystery, in that question of does it actually come out. One of the things I remember exploring with you when we worked together is this whole interesting relationship between, in my case my relationship with power and then how I deal with power or express power, or operate with and act out of *power with,* with other people – how those two things are so closely connected.

And I think when we talk about power, it can be an easy mistake to make, to only look outside of ourselves to try to understand power without looking inside ourselves at *our own* connection with it – at our own relationship with power.

DP: Yes. That's to a degree hugely dependent on our foundations, and what kind of model of power was present as we were growing up – since there's a strong tendency to re-enact that.

CL: Right! So in other words, the way power played out, or was represented, in the way we grew up, we can then play that out in the way that we operate in the world.

DP: Yes, yes.

CL: … or the way we experience ourselves.

DP: By being heavy-handed, coercive or subservient. Or shaped by a kind of psychic sub-tendency to be subservient to some big idea like royalty.

So it's a model, also a model of power; to me, it's an absolutely transparent model of power in the world. And for *power over* as well.

CL: Well, certainly the trappings of it are shouting out 'This is a model of power', regardless of the degree of power that's actually there. I think there's also a whole thing about power where… – in fact, years and years ago when I was more of a behaviourist, I remember that there were people running courses on how to present oneself and how to be a powerful manager – things like that. And on some of these courses – which I'm pleased to say wasn't my style – some people were running courses where people were learning how to look and sound powerful in order to impress people, to then obey them and respect them.

DP: Yes, yes.

CL: And it was never really sustainable. Of course for the person doing that, the person acting that part because they didn't feel it inside because it wasn't real for them, they felt they were compromising themselves the whole time, so it was also incredibly draining. The whole thing really didn't work. But I think there's also that thing – I don't know what you think about this – my feeling is that people who feel strong in themselves, who've got their own kind of inner power – I seem to find that those people are less prone to being overly subservient or overly compliant. But they also seem to be less prone to trying to dominate or control other people. I don't know what you think about that.

DP: Yes, well, it seems to me, depending on where we start, there's the modelling in the world of *how to be* in relation to power. There's a very wonderful example that's rolling day by day at the moment as we speak. There's also the kind of work of finding out, which is familiar to you, but it may not be familiar to everybody – the work of finding out how much of the foundation, how much of who we have become... – were there omissions? Was there distress? Or was there a lot of beneficial learning in there? And gentle and/or vigorous digging into all of that. I think fairly often, if it's done well, it means that the person in a way finds the thing you were talking about; they in a sense realise their own power. It becomes real, as opposed to something that's too much some of the time and not enough at other times, and so on. Does that make sense?

CL: Absolutely, yes. And thank you for reminding me of that, the importance of digging back through where we came from, and recognising that where we came from is inevitably going to be playing out in the present moment, whether or not we notice that or whether or not we believe it. Because again, often people can talk about the culture they grew up in and they may talk about it, and say, 'Well, of course my parents were like this, that and the other, but *I'm* not like that'. Well, sometimes we can believe that, but sometimes it's not really the case; because as you've just reminded me, we do play stuff out, and exploring the degree to which we may be doing that, and exploring where we came from… And the thing you said about too much and too little – that's very interesting.

I've known people who've grown up in families where the father, or in some cases both parents, were quite powerful leaders of one sort or another. And where, when the person comes into adulthood, they've got a well-developed sense of comfort or ease in being in a position where they're directing things. But some of those people may actually lack another side of it, which is the one of what's it like to be the person working for somebody like that in a powerful way, or what it's like to understand the people who are *not* directing the situation – because those people are just as important! We need to understand those people as well. And I think that's a good example of too much and too little. And of course a lot of people in those environments will have come up with a much more balanced connection with power – that's just an example.

DP: And the foundation *does* matter. I'm a person of a certain age. The family I grew up in was hugely creative – creativity in all dimensions – and that was the model I grew up with technically. But it was the Second World War, and with the very desperate state of life, there was an enormous amount of stress in the household to do with money etc. etc., which was my learning. However, because she was very disabled, or quite disabled by arthritis, my grandmother lived with us. Looking back on all of this – and this may sound a bit oversimplified – there was next to no love from parents – love in the sense of seeking the flourishing of others/children. But my grandmother was always there. And with my grandmother, that's how I knew about love; and without her I might not have done otherwise. For me, that has shaped all kinds of stuff down the years. And I didn't know that until I was quite old.

CL: Well, sometimes people say to me, 'Oh my God, I've just realised this now! Why has it taken me so long?' And I've had that thought so many times, often followed by berating myself for not having realised it before. But I've come to realise that if we come to a realisation of these things at all, that's pretty wonderful, whenever we realise them.

DP: In that sense, as people listening might think, it transforms the choices we have – because we don't then have to run the history. It might be tricky to get off of it, because of some deep memory that grips us. And it's hard to let go of – but it is possible. So this is a kind of fundamental humanistic perspective, fundamental Humanistic Psychology. This is a position.

CL: Something else that's just struck me, Denis. Very often it can appear to us, or to a person, that when we're exploring something about ourselves, there's a kind of polarised choice of, 'Do we explore it purely on the level of how we're behaving in the present now?' – or the only other option may appear to be, 'Do we go back into a sort of psychoanalytic, deep analysis of awful things that happened to us as a child?'. That's quite an extreme simplification of those two poles ….

DP: I would want to move away from the term 'psychoanalysis'; it's really just about personal development.

CL: Exactly. But I think I was saying this as a kind of backdrop to saying that the thing you're talking about is somewhere in the middle of that. It is a kind of middle way of investigating where we came from, and how that's shaped us, how we've also evolved from it and where we are now; and then translating that into where we are now and what we're doing now. So we're not either just focusing in a kind of behavioural sense on actions of the day; but we're also not just focusing on a kind of pathological perspective on the past where we're taking a much more – as you say – personal-growth perspective on the whole story.

DP: Because it can be quite a lot simpler. There are people who may be thinking: 'Oh well, this is oversimplified'. But it seems to me that just looking back on life in terms of: where the positive learning resided?; where did the positive learning come from in terms of how we learned how to be people, who to be?; what were the omissions? (that's a *very* tricky bit); what are the things that *didn't* happen, that by and large *should* have happened, or would have happened for most people? That's very difficult, because it's something that didn't happen and isn't there, right? Then where was the distressed learning? Where were we learning stuff in a condition of distress or pain? So far as we know those three things, it's not that it's everything – but it's sufficient, it seems to me.

CL: I completely agree with you. I remember years ago when I first heard about this idea of unprocessed material – some of us called it 'baggage', stuff from the past that hasn't been processed. I hadn't learned about this, and I got the idea in my head that the solution to my life was to identify, name and process every bit of my unprocessed material from the past. *All* my 'baggage' had to be processed! And I started working on this, and quickly realised that: (a) that wasn't possible; and (b) it wasn't really a good idea.…

...[**DP:** No, no, no!]...

CL: … to make my life about doing that! Whereas what you're talking about is much more, well, practical in a way of looking at it, where what you're looking at is actually relevant to you now.

DP: Yes, yes indeed.

CL: And I think that's one of the reasons I love the humanistic approach. Because it's not about some sort of mechanistic approach to house-cleaning in some way.

DP: Yes, like some kind of purification. But anyway, there's a diversity, and we don't need to get on to other ways of doing things. But sometimes the diversity of methods of doing this kind of thing suits different people.

CL: I agree.

DP: And I do think there are styles of person and upbringing for which Humanistic Psychology doesn't work. And where other things *do;* I didn't used to like that, but now I want to honour that. *[laughs]*

CL: I really appreciate that. And that's something I've always appreciated about you, Denis – that you always do what you just did then – just reminding us of the importance of diversity, and not getting overly fixed on one particular kind of angle in. And I think that's very, very important. I also think that it's quite a challenging perspective as well, because for me, and I think for a lot of people, sometimes there can be a tendency to try to find *the* right way – because then, you don't really have to reflect any more; then you can just go on automatic and follow a particular thing; whereas I also know that being conscious in the moment and remaining open to experience and reflection are really much more the way to go.

DP: Yes, they are; and it's tricky, because the world is full of *power-over* type authority.

CL: Yes. I think that's true. And I also think something that's just occurred to me – that there are times, I think, when we can actually get benefit from giving somebody else the authority in relationship to something – albeit temporarily. I've had situations where I was uncertain about something, let's say, or wasn't sure if something's okay. When I've turned to somebody who I think has some authority on the topic or on the theme, and they've listened to what I had to say, they've said, 'Actually, Catherine, I think that's fine; I think what you're doing is fine'. And the fact that they gave me that reassurance was extremely helpful and really assisted me in processing whatever I was experiencing and whatever was going on. And in many cases, things seemed to miraculously transform almost overnight as a result. Who knows what really was the causal factor in that.

DP: It's telling a story about something that may not be right – which is what all of us do about ourselves, and I suppose relative to the world.

CL: Well I think we have to, otherwise we just don't know what the hell's going on!

CL: Well, indeed, indeed.

CL: My feeling is we don't know what the hell is going on, and that recognising and accepting that 24/7 is a bit much.

DP: Well particularly at the moment. Overwhelm is easily available!

CL: Absolutely.... And coming back to *power over* and *power with*, something else I've noticed is how, when we're under stress or in overwhelm or exhausted, these are probably the times when we're most likely to revert to sorts of unconscious, controlling behaviours, if that's something we've got in us. I've seen people who are normally very – let's say very consultative or fair-minded, humane in the way they deal with other people, become much more difficult and much more brittle and controlling when they're in a bad state.

DP: Yes – right, right. And particularly when short of sleep. Or exhausted because there's been an enormous effort over a period of time expended on something. It's very, very hard to keep together the learning that's included in life.

CL: Exactly. And over this last couple of years, a lot of people have experienced a great deal of fear. And fear on its own is draining, even if people are getting plenty of sleep, I've noticed.

DP: I think that's fair enough; I agree.

CL: I've noticed myself during the period having an enormous amount of sleep, so I'm thinking: 'Why am I sleeping so much??' Then I think: 'You know – I actually think I need this – and I'm going to have it!'

So is there anything else you'd like to say about *power with* and how it relates to *power over*, before we switch into talking about leaders in the world today?

DP: Well, I think what I would be missing from this is a decades-long preoccupation of mine, that I became gradually clear about from the *power-over* perspective – which is that living from love, in small groups, families, couples and so on, is like a bubble in some ocean of dominion, as I now think about it – 'dominion' meaning *power over*. And because I'm visual, for me the evidence isn't about writing or whatever; it's just a visual of how the culture deals with itself.

I must have probably several dozen photographs of buses in and around London and elsewhere with posters for films on the outside, almost all of which have men shooting guns, etc. etc. There's a culture, as it seems to me, a fundamental culture of dominion that we live in, and it's global, and isn't just to do with macho masculinity. It's there, it's tolerated and even celebrated as a great thing, all the time. And that's really difficult in relation to, for instance, the kind of commoning group that I've been a part of – the Independent Practitioners Network (IPN) that I know you're familiar with.

CL: Yes.

DP: It's 20 years of a group that doesn't have a leader, that's never had a leader, that meets and co-operatively figures out what it wants to do and what it needs to do, and what it's interested in doing, making decisions, etc. etc., including, to some degree, about finance and other arrangements. But it's a bubble, you see. It's still a bubble. It's a practitioner group, but it's a bubble in a world, where what practitioners do is completely dominated by a tiny number of regulatory authorities. So this may seem a bit long-winded, but I think that's true generally, you see.

CL: I agree; and I think most people are very accustomed to hierarchical models, whether it's in businesses or even in social groups, or even in families. And a lot of us have grown up with that as a backdrop, and it's therefore what we're more familiar with, and in some ways more at ease with, because we're familiar with it.

DP: Yes, that's right; that's what I mean. It's tolerated. It's kind of 'natural' (quote / unquote) and also (quote / unquote) 'inevitable'. That's very, very difficult, I find, because it's inevitable. I find that still very difficult. And anyway, I've spent a lot of time researching that in the last several years, and I'm now making a movie, a 50-minute movie about it – showing it, showing lots of examples of evidence, if you'd look for this.

CL: Yes. Depicted in a particular way, which will be different from how somebody else would've depicted it. That's going to be very interesting when it comes out.

DP: Not a book, you see; not an academic article….

CL: Yes. Actually, you know the thing you said about practitioners and regulatory bodies; I was going say '...except for people like *me* who are completely unregulated'. And in fact my kind of little joke is that I'm unregulatable! I've had many people over the years say, 'Yes, but Catherine, if you don't have a psychotherapy diploma or whatever, how do you persuade people that you have the authority to do the work with them?'. And my response has been, 'Most of the people I meet who might want to work with me don't care about that'. They care about their actual experience of what it's like to be in a room with me or on Zoom with me…. And they trust their own experience as a person in regard to that. I feel like that's a really important thing as well, in regard to this whole question of power – which is, we have a sensitivity within us about what we want, what's going on around us, how we respond to it. Is it supporting us? Are we being controlled? Are we being supported and helped to flourish? We can feel it, can't we? When we connect with what we're actually feeling, rather than trying to overly analyse things – our *actual experience*.

DP: And as you said, there's an ease with and an expectation of authority, the *power-over* position in institutions. And that's what I mean by swimming in and now living in an ocean. And I think what's been difficult in some of those connections is that the bubble can flow to the surface and evaporate, because it's under pressure. There's a boundary with *power over* all the time.

CL: Yes. Something else I just want to add, which just occurred to me in relation to that, is that when I'm personally in a state of experiencing *power with* between myself and other people with whom I'm connected, when I'm connected to my own inner core of power, or whatever you might want to call it, my perception of what you've just described is altered. When I'm in that particular state, I don't actually experience being part of a culture of dominion, as you've described it. It's not that I don't believe it exists, but I don't feel subject to it in those moments.

DP: Oh, right. Well, it is a choice – it's to a considerable degree a choice. Not a complete choice, but there is a lot of choice.

CL: …yes, and I think there's a capacity in us to transcend the limitation, feeling limited by being part, being subject to that culture. And I think that's a kind of a saving grace that we each as individuals have, that we've got the opportunity to explore it.

DP: Yes, and for me it means generating institutions in which the dominion is absent – of which, as you know, the IPN (as in Independent Practitioners Network) is an example; but there's huge (not very much in the UK, it turns out) – there's enormous interest in the commons and in 'commoning', if that's the right word, as ways of organising production, etc. etc., organising work. So that's an example of *power with*. And it turns out that the commons, historically, before they were endlessly suppressed in the UK, were *power-with* institutions.

CL: Of course these days, many people don't know much about that at all.

DP: And it was a gigantic piece of *power-with* history that was suppressed very clearly and cleanly by the dominion. So, it's difficult. There's a lot, there's a terrific tension between living from *power with* and the surroundings.

I think one could step out of it, as you say. As soon as one steps out the door into the street, one is by and large back into it, in some ways.

CL: In some ways, yes. I think it's a very interesting phenomenon. I think there's a kind of semi-permeable thing that goes on in regard to that. And I find that to be an interesting exploration. Can I walk into any situation and retain my own sense of my own autonomy? Can I retain that, whilst participating in the world?

DP: Well it's a kind of recurring task, isn't it – which we may be more or less capable at, depending on where we are.

CL: … and whether we've had enough sleep….

DP: Indeed!

CL: Wonderful. Thank you very much, Denis; that's very interesting.

So I just want to switch slightly.… If we think about how things are in the world at the moment, which of course everyone has their own view and opinion about, and about what should be done. But I like to think that there are a lot of people in leadership positions, and in positions of influence, who would genuinely like to be part of the solution in whatever way that plays out. Some of those people are listening to this podcast. Do you think that what we've been talking about is important for those people to be considering right now?

DP: Well, I do – in that I don't think there's any question that a person who is what I've in the past called 'emotionally incompetent', which is another way of naming what we're talking about, is likely to be a more effective leader – no matter what they're doing. And that's become much more commonplace in local ways. For instance, I live in Brussels, and outside the door we do now and again see the police dealing with prostitution and drug-taking; and it's become really very clear that they're becoming extremely capable and skilled – what I would think of as an emotionally competent way of doing that. There's a sort of gentleness, there's an even-handedness, firmness and so on. So it can develop, even in policing….

CL: That's wonderful to hear!

DP: I did quite a lot of work at the University of Surrey with policing, moving in that direction. It's very hard for people who are in a hierarchy necessarily to be able to be *power with* where they need to be. I think that's a leadership issue, to recognise that there is a place for hierarchy. And that *power with* is something that a brother or sister of that. Does that make sense?

CL: Absolutely, yes. So – to recognise that both are important and that they're related, and to know which one is appropriate at the time.

DP: Yes, that's it.

CL: We're in a particular kind of rarefied situation at the moment in the world. Do you think that this particular situation we're in now casts a different light on the importance of this theme for leaders?

DP: I don't know. I mean – who would want to be prime minister at the moment?

CL: Exactly.

DP: But – and – leadership at the state level is essential. So to honour that choice, wherever it is. And I think it could be argued, to be a bit grandiose, that the situation in the Ukraine sets *power over* against *power with*. The Russian state is to me absolutely captured by dominion – way more than elsewhere, and particularly in recent years. Whereas Europe – and people might not think that that includes the UK – Europe is a kind of commons, very messy, murky with all of the discussions and disagreements and negotiations and back-scratching and so on that goes with reaching co-operative decisions, and is a completely other culture. And that's the Russians' problem to some degree. They can't bear it. They can't do it.

CL: That's a very interesting perspective. I've heard so many different perspectives on what's happening. And I haven't heard that one before.

DP: It could be, as I say, a bit grandiose, but I've been trying to do witness partly because of this movie, for quite a long time and in some detail. People say it's a clash between authoritarianism and democracy. Well, you could say that it's between *power over* and *power with*.

CL: But when you put it that way, that then triggers different kinds of questions, I think, than if you say it's a clash between authoritarianism and democracy.

DP: Well they're not actually that far apart: for me, to some extent the one translates into the other. And it's a very difficult time because of that. Very difficult.

CL: Definitely.

DP: Hence the title of my film, *Difficult Times*!

CL: When do you suppose that the film might be available?

DP: Well, before the end of the year as we speak, all being well. It's sort of finished, but it's got various questions that need to be resolved. It's partly to do with co-operatively showing it to people and seeing what happens, what they say….

CL: Great. Well, I'm looking forward to seeing it. I might find it difficult to watch, I imagine. As it's called *Difficult Times*, is it going to be something that some people will find challenging to watch, do you think?

DP: Well, I've made it in a very different idiom compared with what I usually do, and I've made it in a quite (you could say) performative, theatrical kind of way, deliberately getting away from conventional documentaries. Some people see it as very poetic. But it's intended to evoke feeling about the state of affairs. We'll see…. Without pretension, I think I'm in Picasso / Guernica territory; that's the time we're in here. And Goya. People may be familiar with Goya's kind of non-core art; the stuff that he did about warfare, the horrors of war and so on. That needs to be said at the moment, to me. It's been hidden still. Still hidden. So, do we want to know? Well, good question!

CL: Indeed. Well, I look forward to finding out, how it feels watching that film.

CL: So we're just about to start moving towards completing the episode. So, if people listening to this, if we imagine people listening to this, and some of them will have thought, 'This is just great, and I really feel I've followed it, and some of it confirms things I already knew. And this is really helpful, and I feel I'm integrating it as I go, and there are some ideas here I can actually go and explore further.'

But supposing there are other people listening to it who think, 'This is really great, but it is actually very new to me, a lot of what Denis and Catherine have been talking about. And I feel a bit flummoxed as to how I can explore it a bit more, or how I can even bring some of this into informing myself as a leader and as a person.' So if you think about that kind of person listening to this, what might you offer them in terms of how they might engage a bit more with some of what we've been talking about, whether just in reflection or actually in bringing it into action?

DP: Yes, well.… Given that the internet is such a cornucopia, it's hard to know where to point people these days. To me, the thing is to find some affinity group, find some group of other people who are in roughly the position that you're in, and start digging a bit into your joint history, your personal history and so on. That sounds very obscure, but otherwise, I'd say just find a good therapist. There are huge numbers of good, reliable, sensible books on the market about self-development, personal development and, indeed, Humanistic Psychology. And some are ridiculous. And there's also the personal journey of figuring out what works for you. And there isn't a way around that one.

I think people need to open inquiries, but not necessarily believe that they've found it till they've found their 'Yes'. And then something happens – as with John Heron, you see. For me, I thought, yes – I know this is right. But that requires open-ended inquiry. Not getting it from somebody telling you that this is the right thing. They may tell you something that's very useful, but it has to feel right, before you get into digging in a diligent way into your story, into your history. Does this make sense to me?

CL: Yes, it does, yes. I completely get that. Starting an inquiry and not closing it until you reach the 'Yes'. And that idea of reaching the 'Yes' I think is so important, because that's something that each person can only experience for themselves. It's not like going to school and doing an exam and getting it marked.

DP: No, exactly. That's it, indeed.

CL: 'Have you reached that moment where it feels right?'

DP: Yes, yes. It's a good thing. Is it a 'yes'? I think then, certainly in my experience, there can be a series of yes's. One could get to something and say that's a 'yes'. And then later it turns out – 'Oh dear, well, it wasn't all that of a "yes"!' There's this difference between… – being able to receive from some authority the truth about things – is a fantasy. What we *can* do is to inquire in an open-ended way, diligently, until we find a 'yes'. I think that's a Humanistic Psychology position, anyway.

CL: Definitely.

DP: But otherwise, we might have to go through all sorts of things. Somebody recommended to me Oswald Spangler's book about... you know! Stuff! [*The Decline of the West]*…. It's three inches thick and I looked at it and looked at it and read it, and thought, 'This is definitely not a "yes"'.

CL: I went through the exact same experience in relation to that book! After my father passed away, it was on his shelf with a lot of other very terrifying books. And it ended up going back to my house, because I thought it looked intellectual and…

DP: … well, very 'yes'. Other people find it remarkable and talk about it at length. But anyway, the point is just to inquire, to institute an inquiry into how we 'do' ourselves; how do you *'do'* yourself? Where did you learn it? And what could you do without? And what could you do with enhancing? Would you agree with that?

CL: I would, 100 per cent. I feel like my whole life is an inquiry – but that's just me. And some people find that odd, and that's also fine. And then there are also local inquiries within that, like on particular themes as well, which I think….

DP: Oh yes, yes – I agree. For instance, for me, not least, the kind of opening to – totally unexpectedly, opening to serious exercise – that's something that has become really important.

CL: You mean physical exercise?

DP: Yes.

CL: And we sometimes suddenly find ourselves incorporating something in our lives that we just never expected to be incorporating at that time. My one on that is yoga. I *hated* yoga, and could never do it. It just hurt! I hated it. Until about a year and a half ago, when I had the idea of trying it, and suddenly I loved it! Suddenly it was a complete part of my life, and it was exactly right.

DP: Yes. And I think this is an adjunct to what we were saying earlier, that part of our inquiries may mean stepping out from comfort zones, stepping into something that feels either foreign or – 'Well, would I really want to do that?' . And then finding that it's a 'yes'; where there's another 'yes' to one side.

CL: Wonderful, great. Well, this has been a fantastic conversation, Denis. Thank you very much indeed. I feel like it's one of those episodes that someone could listen to several times.

DP: Oh, maybe *need* to! – but anyway, getting to 'yes': that's the theme, getting to 'yes'.

CL: Getting to 'yes'. So if we think back over this conversation today, Denis, has there been a favourite part for you?

DP: Oh no – I'm not sure I remember it well enough! I'm of a certain age, and verbal memory or oral memory aren't what they used to be – actually it's never been very good. Yes, it's been intriguing. I liked your repetition, which I might learn from, as in, 'If people are listening, I wonder what they would think about that question?'. I don't perhaps do enough of that.

CL: Well, yes, because I'm here talking with you, and also we're both talking with an unnamed and unnumbered group of people spread out across the planet.

DP: Listening, listening.

CL: It always fascinates me. They're all there – all those experiences are going on as well. They're here in the room, but we can't see them. So, that's interesting.

Where, if people want to find you, where would you like them to go?

DP: My website's the most sensible point of connection, which is https://denis.postle.net.

CL: Great! Thank you. I'll put that address in the show notes; and when your film *Difficult Times* comes out, do you have any idea where we'll be able to find it?

DP: It'll be on a combination of Vimeo and YouTube. It'll eventually go on to YouTube.

CL: And will it go on to your YouTube channel?

DP: Well, I'm very confused about YouTube and YouTube's confused about me! But you'd be able to find it if you Google the name: my name – just 'Denis Postle videos', and you'll find it.

CL: I'm just going to write that down.

DP: I can give you the link, if you've got notes that people can see.

CL: I do put show notes on with each episode, and those will show up if someone looks at it on their browser.

DP: Fine. That's the best way into it because the film is there now, but it's private, so to speak. It's been there for some time, but only when it's finished will I take off the 'private' and it'll become public. Great. And of course there are other videos sitting there that people can sample – I think there are around 20 videos around it.

CL: Wonderful. Well, if you would send me your YouTube channel address, I'll put that in the show notes as well. Fantastic! Well, thank you.

DP: Very good. Thank you for inviting me. It's been great – a very enlivening morning.

CL: Thank you so much, really wonderful. And we've had many, many conversations over the years, so I knew this would be an interesting conversation – and I wasn't disappointed! I'm very grateful to you, Denis, for coming and joining.

DP: Very good. Good luck with it all – thank you.

About the contributors

Denis Postle: Eight years of art school, concluded with the Royal College of Art. Twenty years of directing broadcast documentary films morphed into Humanistic Psychology, initially via co-counselling and co-operative enquiry, deeply influenced by Anne Dickson and John Heron, and later co-running four years of Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP) facilitator training at the University of Surrey. Resistance to the occlusion of this self-directed experiential learning tradition by professionalised therapy trainings led to co-founding of the Independent Practitioners Network. Latterly I became a European, with a home and a wife in Brussels, a practice settled as 'human condition work' and a return to media production.

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