

HUMANISTIC ALCHEMY

PRINCIPLES - RATIONALE AND ORIENTATION

RETURN TO CENTRE

“ Am I boverred ? ” shrugged the argumentative teenager in the Catherine Tate show. Well, yes we are. So how come ? Over the last 20 years many trainings in the psy field have become academised, bureaucratised, medicalised and marketised. The future practitioner’s personal development, if factored in at all, is often hived off to the domain of individual therapy. In Humanistic Alchemy the practitioner’s personal development takes a position of centrality, the sine qua non for the development of worthwhile practitioners rather than mere imitations. John Rowan, a foundational figure for humanistic psychology in Britain refers to how emotional competence in working with others depends on self-awareness and self-understanding : “this is the heartland of humanistic psychology”. Read more

Through groupwork in a two-year course community, HA provides the necessary crucible for a deep formative process for the person who desires this. This is both a return to the roots of the human potential movement and a radical reorientation. This process will be esoteric in so far as it can only be really known to those who participate. HA jettisons such redundant contemporary fetishes as transparency to uninvolved outside interests* and bins targets set by by third parties. Lines of accountability are redrawn, with self-regulation replacing the farce of regulation based on ignorant force. Read more

HA assembles a large body of highly experienced practitioners from whom, by direct contact and observation within the apprenticeship model of learning, course participants will gain unrivalled access to exemplars of skilled and ethical practice. The course is also conceived to foster an environment within itself that supports the emergence of new forms of leadership. A pivotal assumption of HA is that healing of the individual divorced from their social and ecological context has become a nonsense. HA is the first course to openly address both the disillusion with ungrounded and inflated New Age initiatives and the ennui with, and distrust of, the mainstream psy field. It both draws on and develops the human faculties necessary for the actualisation of bodymind, transpersonal, creative expressive and ecosocial dimensions of human being.

*e.g. assorted quangos such as The Health Professions Council, Skills for Health and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, all of which operate out of an irremediably medical model.

CRITIQUE OF PROFESSIONALISATION

To the extent that in the last 20 years the professions have been increasingly positioned by government as agencies for a range of population control agendas, the organisations that represent occupational fields have been subjected to increasing governmental pressures and loss of capacity for independent evolution and critique. This trend has been well documented by sociologists.

As with mainstream political parties the umbrella organisations in the psy field (BPS, BACP, UKCP, BABCP and BPC) compete with each other, sometimes less than temperately, to occupy the centre ground and to achieve preeminent status from which their members can tender for NHS (still the largest employer in Europe) and other employment favours. What unifies them is an agenda of domination, of maintaining power over their sector, and ensuring power and status for their members over non-members. The effect on practice itself is to tame, domesticate and ultimately manualise it; as with the academically-generated obsessional categorisations of skill sets by the business-led quango Skills for Health; and New Labour's roll out of IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies), the reductio ad absurdum of this trend, with its barely disguised agenda of being seen to be offering therapy to get the unemployed back to work, work that is either not available, or if it is, is either dangerous or boring or below the minimum wage. Wildness, and with it innovation, are off limits. HA is therefore happy to exist in the wilderness, distinct from any need to exert control over anyone else.

Furthermore the umbrella organisations consistently ignore the uncomfortable truth that there has never really been any definable or delineated activity deserving the name of either counselling or psychotherapy. As for psychoanalysis, the arguments will continue to rage for years as to who is really entitled to call themselves a psychoanalyst (this has served it well in so far as the government has swerved the headache of trying to regulate that title). The proliferation of schools and varieties of often contradictory activities laying claim to be counselling or psychotherapy plus the overlaps with or mirroring of many other modes of delivery of personal development and healing combine to put the professionalisation project very much in question. The situation is further complicated by the fact that much of these activities, as it is often remarked, cannot readily be separated from what people do anyway in their everyday lives. With the relational flesh and juice so resistant to capture, politically all that remains is the husk of title.

THE DEPROFESSIONALISED FRINGE

Humanistic Alchemy therefore intentionally occupies a deprofessionalised fringe position in relation to the conventional psy field. The focus shifts to facilitating the development and creativity of the marginals. Richard House, co-editor of 'Implausible Professions: Arguments for Pluralism and Autonomy in Psychotherapy and Counselling' quotes from Goodwin's 1997 paper presented at The Scientific and Medical Network Conference on 'Heresy and the Challenge of Revolutionary Ideas' : 'Chaos combines order and irregularity in a subtle way.. Too much order is bad for you !.... Living on the edge of chaos is the best place to be if you want to live a creative life.' It is well known that any mainstream congeals and atrophies without the presence of a healthy fringe. HA dedicates itself to the preservation and furtherance of that healthy fringe. A century ago Jacob Moreno, originator of psychodrama and something of a social prophet, referred to the mainstreaming phenomenon as the 'cultural conserve'. Indeed, there is a sticky mess in the psy field. HA heeds him.

SELECTION PROCESS

A further distinction between psychotherapy and HA as a vehicle for the development of human potential is that no detailed diagnosis of participants' problems in living (including their developmental origins) will be available to the workshop facilitators. Interviewing by the co-ordinators will establish the composition of each two year group with a view to ensuring viability within HA's parameters. The invitation to participate will be on the basis of a hybrid between the guest list for a select party and the shortlist for a group of explorers prepared for a two year expedition into new regions of consciousness. Let's be clear about one thing, this is not the usual 'bums on seats' enterprise. HA only departs when a compatible group of the suitably motivated has assembled.

LIBERATION ETHOS

Introducing systematic rotation of leadership functions within the second year pre- and post- w/e meetings with the course co-ordinators, will minimise 'power over' dynamics and facilitate 'power with' and 'power from within'. HA will endeavour to deconstruct the 'Me Chief, you Indian' institutionalised transferences that many courses uncritically run with.

HA is avowedly useless for the person preoccupied with status, reputation and automatic career advancement. Best go elsewhere.

The stress on bodily and sensuous experience in the bodymind and expressive arts strands, and the experience across all strands of the group itself as a living organism, will start to actualise the assumption of an overarching and underlying unity of domains as expounded in Felix Guattari's 'The Three Ecologies' (1989). There is to be found a philosophy for planetary survival and the affirmation of life,- as opposed to mere survival, through a convergence of the personal, social and ecological. The liberatory ethos, the accent on both personal and cultural freedom, stands as a further guarantor of HA's indefinability as psychotherapy. HA graduates, grounded in a deeper knowledge of who they are and the world that is coming, will be well aware of the peripheral relevance of a registration, a licence, a paper qualification, those markers of professionalisation.

HA locates itself within the field of humanistic psychology, a much broader terrain than humanistic psychotherapy. The components of the course, as selected by the co-ordinators, involve an inevitable privileging of selected modalities, bearing in mind that the monthly rhythm sets a limit of twenty one weekends in each two year cycle.

INDEPENDENT PSYCHOPRACTICE

HA will contribute to the expansion of an independent sector of psychopractice. A seminal inspiration for HA was the paper by Denis Postle published in the 'International Journal of Psychotherapy', Spring 1998, entitled 'The Alchemist's Nightmare : Gold into Lead - the annexation of psychotherapy in the UK'. Here is a vivid account of the political and economic processes by which something alive gets canned, denatured and rendered at least half-dead. HA starts from an alchemical concern with revitalisation. A sine qua non is therefore to step aside from the professionalisation process within the psy field. HA gathers together a range of personal

development modalities capable of flourishing in the meadows and prairie beyond the walled gardens described in 'Gold into Lead'. As Postle puts it, when facing soul death, the better option is exile. Thus HA has a psy-ecological agenda of promoting the survival and flourishing of an open space in the UK psychoterritory.

GENIE AGAIN EXITS BOTTLE IN A SHIFTING CONTEXT

HA does not rule out the possibility that the process of professionalisation was initially motivated (as were some medieval craft guilds) by a desire to esoterically protect the core of psychopractice, best maintained and developed in a context of limited circulation. There would be a proper recognition that some matters cannot be adequately represented or talked about beyond the therapeutic relationship itself and therefore there was little to be said beyond it. However the massive expansion of counselling and psychotherapy training in the 1990s sidelined any such purist consideration, dissolving its context and putting an end to that logic. Simultaneously there occurred a contradictory conjunction of societal processes; on the one hand the arrival of the internet with its apparent universalisation of access to knowledge, and on the other hand the late capitalist market crisis of oversupply, instigating an opposing need to limit the distribution of knowledge, particularly for knowledge-based professions. Securing economic advantage meant the quest for professionalisation was now increasingly in opposition to free human personal development.

Fifty years ago humanistic psychology arose in the context of an explosion of exploratory groupwork, thereby releasing the human potential genie from a medical and psychotherapeutic bottle. Recently, the professionalisers, some facing their trainings going to the wall as the recession bites, especially the professionalisers of humanistic psychotherapy, hoping for a state-backed market monopoly, threw their lot in with the New Labour state, a state that had become increasingly interested in extending its control over everyday life. We await without prejudice the evidence that the Coalition government is really turning that liner round in its tracks. Can this unseemly pair of interested parties, government and the training lobby, act in concert to capture the psy field? HA, itself in part an outgrowth from The Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy Against State Regulation says NO ! Furthermore, if they were to succeed their success would in reality be a failure. In the medium to long term they might as well bin the resultant travesty of both humanistic psychology and psychoanalysis. The genie is once again out of the bottle, and declines the coercive invitation to be bunged back in it.

A PARTING OF THE WAYS

On the one hand Humanistic Alchemy reaches back to a time pre-1980 when the notion of a profession of psychotherapy and counselling had almost no-one transfixed in its spell. On the other hand HA looks forward to the time, already arriving, of the portfolio person, a more 'renaissance person' figure, whose skillsets and occupational capacities are interdisciplinary, stretching across erstwhile rigid boundaries. This dual vision amounts to a parting of the ways. From the professionalised to the deprofessionalised, from a centripetal modernism to a centrifugal post-

modernism. Before its commercialisation, British sixties counterculture referred to itself through its house journal, 'International Times', as 'The Underground'. HA in the internet age can hardly be underground, but by virtue of its 'Beyonding' it remains countercultural and will be busy breaking new ground in the psy field. Watch this space.

The core values of humanistic psychology are every bit as much in need of champions post 2010 as they were in 1970, despite a somewhat self-congratulatory vogue in some humanistic psychotherapy circles for maintaining humanistic psychology is now mainstream, - if it is at all, then it is only in a most attenuated form. In the repeated temporary communality of the long weekend workshops at the heart of HA, HP2 (humanistic psychology plus human potential) rises again, a phoenix in a 'flame place'* , the flame that has been kept alive at The Open Centre since its founding in 1978.

*A term coined by Richard Mowbray, a member since the early days of The Open Centre and author of the eye-opening book 'The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration : A Conservation Issue for The Human Potential Movement' see information.

THE 'WHY' AND 'WHAT FOR' OF GROUPWORK

A further note here on humanistic psychology and groupwork as it pertains to Humanistic Alchemy. Early encounter*[note 1] group theorists from within the human potential movement were ambivalent about raising the why and what for of group work, fearing that questions concerning the transferability of the experience subverted the importance of a 'here and now' focus. HA maintains a both/and position. The experience is irreducibly worthwhile in the moment for its own sake and fulfils the situationist*[note 2] imperative to live life passionately now. Stepping back after the events of the group to reflect on their cumulative effect, HA resolves the means versus ends dichotomy (the Western linear obsession with function and application - 'what does this lead to ?' or, put another way, the penetration of subjectivity by the capitalist preoccupation with surplus value*[note 3]), by validating unpreprogrammed personal growth, whereby awareness may be expanded along any number of axes, the responsibility for which remains with the individual HA participant. This question of the means and ends to which experience is put is particularly relevant today for humanistic psychology, given its prizing of non-hierarchical relationship, in that HR (Human Resources -in a way that says it all) departments of corporations and other organisations will often rely on skills and techniques lifted from humanistic psychology. But in those settings, these skills are typically recuperated, reset to serve an instrumental agenda of exerting power and control over employees, 'power over' in the smoothest possible way . To quote John Rowan, in an echo of his Red Therapy days :

The point is humanistic psychology is always about the realisation of potential, not its guidance into some groove laid down by someone else.

*[note 1] the word comes from existentialism and refers to a real meeting where each treats the other as a full human being.

*[note 2] the situationists analysed capitalism in its current consumerist form and focused on the resulting poverty of everyday life itself. They drew attention to the priority of real live activity, that continually experiments and corrects itself, as opposed to the reiteration of static ideologies that are also to be consumed.

*[note 3] the term comes from Marx and refers to the difference between the value of work done and wages paid.

EDUCATIONAL VALUES

Humanistic Alchemy terms itself a 'course', locating itself as having educational value in the classical sense of education as a drawing out of what is mostly already within and a process of attending to real interests and felt concerns rather than a stuffing of an empty vessel with information. Learning within HA is conceived of as person-centred and as a source of pleasure in its own right, rather than as an instrument for competing in the marketplace or guaranteeing social or professional status. In keeping with this, progress through the course is self and peer evaluated. The facilitator roles in HA are catalytic, consistent with humanistic psychology's high valuation of the learner's spontaneous curiosity and search for meaning as the real motor of development.