

The View from Here

By Hayley Marshall

As my outdoor psychotherapy work has developed, I have been cultivating a regular practice of 'minding my landscape' where I go out and walk the local topography into my body/mind/psyche whilst also reflecting on the process in terms of its value for psychotherapy. I will be writing this seasonal column to share some of my wanderings/wonderings.

Greening the Adult ego state

It's the winter solstice, early afternoon. I'm feeling tired at the end of a long working stretch, and my mind is full of what I call 'therapy buzz'. So I'm off out for a walk.

As I set off along the bottom of the valley the sun is sitting apologetically low in the sky, and I shiver with the impact of the year having 'drained to this pinching day with its paltry hours of watery sun' (Dee 2010). Heading swiftly past the skeletal woodland I begin my climb up the steep pull towards the moor. There is no one else around; in that sense I am alone.

Throughout the previous six years or so, I have developed a profound attachment to this landscape and the elements within it. I feel rooted and supported here, although not always comfortable. Feeling held by this place, I experience a sense of a powerful enduring presence. For me this is an ongoing relational therapeutic process; to paraphrase the words of John Muir, I have found that in going out, I have also been going in.

Of course this is a different kind of therapeutic relationship from the one we usually discuss as psychotherapists. It is a relationship that taps in to our evolutionary heritage (Wilson 1984) concerning our connection with the non-human animate world surrounding us; but current research (Pretty et al 2005; Bird 2007; MIND 2007), shows that this natural relating does indeed have rich possibilities for mental health. One very important aspect of this is the innate ability of human beings to be both soothed and cognitively restored by natural settings.

Out on my walk, this process is very much in evidence as I settle down to observing a buzzard slowly circling above me. The noise of rushing water seems to be everywhere after the melting of the recent snowfall. There is always much to attend to here, bringing my senses into sharp focus; as this landscape whilst constant, is never the same. As I arrive at the top of the hill on Combs Moss I feel a stilling in my body; and as the 'therapy buzz' quiets down, I become more reflective. I am beginning to adjust to the rhythm of the place as my mind is being wiped clean.

Research emanating from the field of environmental psychology demonstrates that contact with natural environments promotes a psychophysiological stress reduction response (Ulrich 1983) within our limbic system, as well as an activation of an attentional recovery

system (Kaplan 1995; Hartig 2004) in the frontal cortex of our brain. These are ancient innate survival responses, with the former important in affecting a swift recovery from fight or flight response; and the latter significant in clearing the mind, providing space for reflection and then regaining cognitive focus.

I understand this green relational process to nestle at the heart of our dynamic Adult ego states (Summers 2011), in that it involves nonconscious (nonverbal, implicit) regulating interactions with the environment. In promoting the shift to a more reflective state it also helps us to develop our more conscious (verbal explicit) 'Integrating Adult' process (Tudor 2003). In outdoor psychotherapy these restorative and regulatory responses form a significant aspect of the work. The Adult ego states of both client and therapist are infused with this green potency assisting them in tolerating and making sense of their experience within the therapeutic process. This 'green medication' can also be suggested as a way of helping some clients, to support and manage their experience between sessions.

Returning to the notion of attachment I am mindful of Allen's (2011) work on the neuroscientific underpinnings for relational TA where he highlights attachment as a stress reducing behaviour in those who are older. Therefore it makes sense to me to talk in attachment terms when discussing this regulatory implicit fit between us and the natural environment.

As I stand and look out over the extended horizon of the Peak District with the sun still just present, I am basking in the gradual shift in my internal state that I have come to expect when spending time out here. I am reminded of Schroeder's (2008) phrase 'inwardly opening out' as he reaches for a description of what's going on for us in green spaces. Just in this moment, this rather neatly captures the experience of my green dynamic Adult ego states!

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