

From the President

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‘In a world facing multiple challenges, self-care and compassion feed souls and spirits’

In this column I often reflect on themes featured in the current issue of *Therapy Today*, sometimes including a personal lived experience dimension. This month I am focusing on two areas - trainee experience of person-centred/humanistic core practitioner training and sexual identity challenges associated with coming out as a woman in a relationship with another woman.

The views and experiences of contemporary person-centred practitioners reported in ‘The big issue’ this month prompted memories of my early therapy training. I vividly recall feeling unsure about therapy theories and concepts as I stepped out of training into practice, and yet that training and learning continue to influence my work and life decades later. Rooted in humanistic psychology and drawing on Carl Rogers’ person-centred concepts, Abraham Maslow’s thinking about human hierarchies of need, John Heron’s early writing on catharsis and Edmund Husserl’s work on phenomenology, the course was centred around a co-designed experiential community of 18 fellow students and two tutors. Theoretical input was minimal, learning occurred in groupwork, and core reading was signposted to help us make meaning of our lived experiences.

The course director was heavily influenced by the human potential movement and the Esalen Institute in California, believing that becoming a therapist required soul-baring, soul-searching and soul-healing explorations of self and others in authentic relational interactions and group contexts. Groupwork and residential were challenging, and navigating these experiential spaces was excruciating at times, but my learning was fundamental to my journey to becoming a person-centred pluralistic practitioner. Despite my longing to have more theory, our group interactions, discussions and processing

fostered meaning making and translation of core philosophical concepts into lived experiences. That immersion in being, relating and navigating relational interactions and intensities was profoundly influential, becoming the weft and warp of my person-centred pluralistic approach.

Practitioner training is a foundational part of therapist development. As part of preparing a textbook on relational ethics, *Navigating Relational Ethics in Day-to-Day Practice: working ethically in the counselling professions*, to be published in September by Routledge, My co-author Andrew Reeves and I hosted research conversations with ethicists, trainers and practitioners from the counselling professions. Our aim was to hear about their experiences of working with ethics, both to enrich and inform the writing of the book. During the conversations the subject of practitioner training arose and a key theme related to delivering the course curriculum differently by reducing theoretical curriculum content. I was interested to notice that many trainers echoed what my original course director had believed - that counselling training should focus on relational content, dynamics and learning more about self/other interactions through individual and

groupwork, with the use of directed learning to increase deeper relational development.

In relation to sexual identity, like training transitions, my process was challenging. In the early 1980s I moved to York with my then husband and my son. During the process of moving I knew that the marriage was failing and that I was questioning my sexual identity. Having volunteering experience I looked around for ways of offering some of my free time, found the local women’s centre and, as they say, never looked back. The work included supporting victims of domestic violence and helping women navigate social care and mental health support. Having originally trained as a mental health nurse I realised further training could enable a move into counselling, at that time in its infancy in the UK.

During my years at the centre I helped set up a women’s counselling service, and I also met my partner, now wife. Almost 40 years later we continue to enjoy sharing life, love and living space. In the 1980s and 1990s, navigating discrimination and hostile or aggressive reactions was difficult at times. Similarly, current issues in trans communities evoke memories of the abject hostility towards those who were perceived as different because of their sexual identity. As advocates for human potential we must challenge attempts to erode recognition and acceptance of fluid gender and sexual identity.

I am writing this after recently returning from presenting at the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy conference in Sligo. The members’ warmth, kindness and generosity of spirit was touching and reminded me of the importance of both giving and receiving succour and solace. I hope readers have multiple ways in which they can access such solace. In a world facing multiple challenges, self-care and compassion feed souls and spirits. ■

