

NWRPA Newsletter November 2018

We are what matters... so who are we?

Robin Hobbes

Friday 9 November 2018

Robin spends his professional life teaching, supervising and practicing psychotherapy and counselling. He has been involved in Transactional Analysis for over 30 years, and since 1987 has been running Elan Training and Development.

In our publicity for this seminar Robin wrote about someone saying to him, "You psychotherapists are a bunch of faithless vicars". He was curious about this – its misguidedness and its truthfulness. He asked us to explore with him the complex social nature of therapist and client applying Wittgenstein's notion of a "background picture" and Taylor's "social imaginary". He asked us to explore a clearing in which a form of openness and constriction may result and we would definitely talk about who we are and what matters to us in being a therapist.

Robin has that seemingly effortless ability to talk of his themes in a way that conveys both simplicity and complexity in what was simultaneously a presentation and an engaged conversation.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, in the *Philosophical Investigations* talks of language as a picture which holds us captive and which we cannot get outside. Charles Taylor wrote about the *Social Imaginary*. This is emphatically not the social theories offered by academics. Theory is thinking about reality in a disengaged mode. The social imaginary is the way in which ordinary people imagine their social circumstances. This is about common understandings which enable social practices.

Robin talked about social imaginaries that many people hold about therapy. To help capture the social imaginary he searched Google Images for *psychotherapy* and showed us the results. From these pictures therapists are often shown writing on pads or clipboards. Therapists are concerned and serious. Couches are as common as chairs. Clients are often attractive young women and predominantly white. Men are rarely shown as clients. In the social imaginary Therapists are outside figures of control and knowledge and they communicate to rather than with their clients.

Robin then turned to the Shakespeare play *Macbeth*. As a social imaginary this offers an early modern medical practice which has something in common with psychotherapy. *Macbeth* is a tragedy which audiences of the time would know from the beginning would end badly. After helping her husband murder his rivals and become King of Scotland Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and her gentlewoman asks for a physician. The physician identifies a great perturbation in her nature and Macbeth asks the doctor to pluck out the diseased part of his wife.

This bears similarities to a modern diagnostic interview. Robin's view is the social imaginary in *Macbeth* shows that early modern society was more psychologically sophisticated than we think. The ideas of trauma, repression and the idea that what you do lives with you are all present in Shakespeare.

The Anatomy of Melancholy by Richard Burton was published in 1621 and so belongs to the same period as Macbeth. It is a very complex literary work and sees melancholia as caused by God, spirits, bad angels, witches and magicians, old age, parents, bad diet, retention, bad air, too much exercise, passions and perturbations of the mind. Again this is closer to modern thinking than we would expect.

The Social Imaginary of psychotherapy has continuity over the centuries. It also has twists and turns, plays back on itself and is constantly evolving. One particularly complex shift came between the 1930s and the 1950s. Ego Psychology changed psychoanalysis from the management of sexual drives to a focus on primary security and shows that insecurity leads to anxiety and depression. This personal issue of security and insecurity paralleled the existential threat of the Cold War and mass destruction.

Many of the prominent Ego Psychologists were European Jews who had fled the Nazi threat but were also treated as a threat to American Christianity. In turn this social imaginary was succeeded by the 1960s and the Age of Authenticity.

Psychotherapists have been portrayed in over five thousand films from 1896 onwards. Most film therapists are nurturing females with female clients. Where they have male clients therapy is sexualised and restores the clients' masculine power. Where therapy with men is not sexualised the female therapist is a lesbian or controlling. The minority of male therapists are shown as emotionally distant.

Film buffs have identified types of movie therapists. In this social imaginary we are portrayed as libidinous leeches, eccentric buffoons, unempathic cold fish, rationalists, repressive agents of social control, unfulfilled women, evil minded doctors, vindictive psychiatrists, omniscient detectives and dramatic healers.

We ended wanting more and I have found these ideas running through my personal imaginary in the time since this seminar. **So thank you to Robin Hobbes** for such a creative symposium.