A Self-Generating Practitioner Community
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Part 1

Starting with ends

What constitutes a healthy practitioner community? I start my answer with the notion of intrinsic value, of what is good as an end in itself. What states of affairs, for human beings, are worthwhile simply by virtue of what they are, not as a means to anything else? Such states are the ultimate ends of action, the final human rationale for individual behaviour. Each person's intrinsic values are the non-negotiable ground on which they stand up to be counted.

Statements of intrinsic value are, on my view, autonomous; they rest on their own epistemological ground, not to be justified by theological assertion or statements of fact. If well-founded, they are also subjective-objective, relative-universal in their formulations. On the one hand they are relative to the person and to the cultural context out of which they have emerged. On the other hand they have reference to the needs and interests of our common humanity within shared features of the human condition. No statement about what is good in itself is ever final, because of its contextual relativity, but every such statement that is thoughtfully put together claims general relevance.

What I present here is my account of intrinsic values. It is certainly not a prescription for other practitioners, who will evolve their own account. But if there are other practitioners whose own autonomous values significantly overlap or resonate with mine, then we constitute a viable network of value. We can commence a fruitful dialogue about the nature of a healthy practitioner community. This chapter is my contribution to that dialogue.

Practitioners within the Independent Therapists Network in the UK would seem to have values that relate to mine, from what I have heard, and from what I have read (Totton, 1995). I am not a member of this network since I live in Italy and work internationally. But there is clearly a strong basis for co-operation.

An account of intrinsic values

The state of affairs I take to be desirable as an end in itself is *human flourishing* in individual and social life. I conceive this flourishing as a process of social participation in which there is a mutually enabling balance between autonomy, co-operation and hierarchy; and which is interdependent with the flourishing of the planetary ecosystem.

• By autonomy I mean a state of being in which each person can in liberty determine and fulfil their own true needs and interests. I do not here mean the autonomy of the isolated and dissociated

Cartesian ego, but the autonomy of the person in a deeply participative relationship with being and other beings (Heron, 1992; 1996).
• By co-operation I mean mutual aid and support between autonomous persons, including negotiation, participative decision-making and conflict resolution.
• By hierarchy I mean a state of being in which a person appropriately takes temporary responsibility for doing things to or for other persons for the sake of their future autonomy and co-operation. This is part of parenthood, education and many professions.

What is valuable as a universal means to this comprehensive end is participative decision-making, which enables people to be involved in the making of decisions, in every social context, which affect their flourishing in any way; and through which people speak on behalf of the wider ecosystem of which they are part.

This is a dynamic account of intrinsic values: to do with the politics of choice and action. Autonomy is about deciding for oneself, co-operation about deciding with others, and hierarchy about deciding for others. And this order seems to be paramount. Only persons who know what their own preferences are can negotiate and co-operate effectively in conjoint decisions. People who do not really know where they stand on an issue have no proper ground for co-operation, and can only huddle together in the middle of a fudge.

Even more critically, a person who does not know how to be autonomous and co-operative cannot make effective decisions for other people to empower their future autonomy and co-operation. Leaders who are not inwardly free can only lead people into sustained submission and subpersonhood. So hierarchy has human value when:
• It is manifested by a person well-grounded in their own autonomy and co-operation, both rooted in a deeply participative relationship with being and other beings.
• It is exercised to empower the emergence of autonomy and co-operation in others.
• It is reduced as that emergence occurs.
• It is abandoned when that emergence has occurred; otherwise it is disvaluable and oppressive of human emergence.

Nikolas Berdyaev (1937) affirms human personhood as the creative process of divine spirit, manifesting as the self-determining subjectivity of persons engaged in the realization of value and achieved in true community (*sobornost*). This gives a theological account of human autonomy and co-operation. But whether theologized or not, the above account of what is intrinsically valuable stands firm, in my view. And it subsumes, within the notion of autonomy as the freely chosen fulfilment of human needs and interests, many other states of being of intrinsic value.

Part 2

The challenge of hierarchy
The challenge of human development on this planet could be construed as the challenge of learning how to manifest hierarchy – deciding for others – in an appropriate and flexible way that honours the flowering of autonomy and co-operation. It is the great challenge of parenthood, itself the primary form of helping, in which deciding for and on behalf of young children is shaped from the outset by a concern for that future flowering, and is progressively reduced over the years as that flowering occurs. The parent is between the Scylla and Charybdis of too little hierarchy, or undercontrol, and too much hierarchy or overcontrol.

A few years ago I was involved in making a TV programme for the BBC on parents and teenagers, which had the unfortunate, but telling, title of 'Living with the Enemy'. In the research for it, it became painfully clear how many parents in the UK are stuck in a compulsive attitude towards their teenagers of overcontrol. It was also clear how counterproductive and useless this attitude is. A teenager cannot learn how to live and emerge as a young adult by being told how to live, but only by the practice of making their own choices, by being supported to be responsible in increasing measure for their own lives.

The parents repeatedly justified their useless overcontrol on the grounds that they were seeking to protect their teenage sons and daughters from the snares and pitfalls of the adult world. But over and again this inappropriate seeking-to-protect merely generated sullen resistance or overt rebellion. And since modern societies have no appropriate rites of passage to initiate teenagers into the real challenges of adult autonomy and co-operation, teenagers today have to make a leap into adulthood simply by virtue of the turn of the years and the external structure and demands of the social system. To meet these demands they learn to exercise a modicum of an apparent autonomy and co-operation, but it is not grounded in a real emotional and volitional inner entry into adulthood.

Political acting out

The political Scylla and Charybdis within family dynamics of too little or too much hierarchy is echoed in all other forms of human association between the family and the state, and beyond that within federations of states and the total international community of states. Democratic institutions seek to find the balance by making the temporary hierarchical control of their officers periodically subject to the autonomous voting rights of their members.

However, the adults who hold office are ex-teenagers who missed a real entry passage into adulthood. Hence they tend to act out in office two left-overs from the unresolved tension of their teenage years. These are the interacting poles of internalized parental overcontrol and adolescent resistance and resentment. The first is acted out as a tendency toward centralized overcontrol, often justified by an assumed need to protect some group or other from an assumed danger; the second as a regular relapse into factional fighting and compulsive resistance, at the expense of exercising any real personal autonomy and social co-operation.

We see both these tendencies at work in our parliamentary democracy in the UK. We also see them at work in many supposedly representative institutions, especially those seeking to court the approval and imprimatur of the government of the day. Thus the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy 'continues to work to achieve statutory regulation of the profession' and justifies this work, and the Council's existence, on the grounds of 'adequately protecting the public' (Tantam and Zeal, 1996). The public, of course, cannot be protected by the statutory regulation of any profession. Such regulation just lulls some people into an uncritical dependence on legalized dogmatism. The public can only be educated to be self-protecting, by learning to claim its right:
  • To have satisfactory evidence from practitioners about their credentials and competence.
  • To know what constitutes such evidence.
  • To be fully informed by practitioners.
  • To participate in whatever decisions practitioners make.

The public has never needed the legalised professionalisation of a few experts. What it has always needed and still needs is the widespread and competent laicisation of itself, so that it becomes empowered to relate effectively to practitioners of any kind, whether legalised or not.

So here within the UKCP the first tendency is at work: a strong compulsion to overcontrol the profession, to regulate it centrally, justified by a specious concern to protect the public. Needless to say, significant numbers of the public will inevitably and healthily discount and ignore all this, just as they have ignored conventional medicine's attempts in the past to protect them from alternative medicine. And the second tendency is at work too, for the UKCP has already been riven by factional splits and infighting between psychoanalytic diehards who want to maintain a patriarchal hegemony over mere psychotherapists, and other groups who resist this (Young, 1996).

Part 3

Finding a model

It surely behoves adult practitioners within the helping professions to step outside this dynamic, which looks very much like adolescent insecurity and mayhem sententiously masquerading as social responsibility. Counsellors and psychotherapists need to find a model for institutional forms and processes which are free of centralised overcontrol and compulsive factionalism, and which have the

sort of empowering hierarchy which serves the flourishing of autonomy and co-operation among its members. It seems fairly clear that if professional helpers are incapable of practising these values in their own working lives, they are in no place to empower their clients to do so.

I believe there is a basic model of community process which has relevance here. It is that of a self-generating culture. Within its broad aegis there are two sub-models which have particular relevance for a community of practitioners: self and peer review, and co-operative inquiry. I will first sketch out the self-generating culture idea in general, then look at how the idea could apply within a practitioner network, including the use of self and peer review and of co-operative inquiry.

A self-generating culture
A self-generating culture, which I have discussed elsewhere (Heron, 1993), is a vision of a community whose members are in a continuous process of co-operative learning and development, and whose forms are consciously adopted, periodically reviewed and altered in the light of experience, reflection and deeper vision. Its participants continually recreate these forms through cycles of collaborative inquiry in living.

In its most comprehensive, society-wide, version, it includes many strands: forms of association; forms of decision-making and political participation; forms of economic organization; forms of supervision and quality control; revisioning a wide range of social roles; forms of ecological management; forms of habitation; forms of education and personal development for all ages; forms of research; forms of intimacy and parenting; forms of conflict resolution; forms of recreation; forms of aesthetic expression and celebration; forms of transpersonal association and ritual.

What all this entails is individual and co-operative commitment to experiential learning and inquiry through living. Each person in the everyday process of his or her personal and professional life is adopting an informal experiential inquiry cycle, what Torbert calls action inquiry. For Torbert (1991) this means extended consciousness-in-action, widening attention to encompass your vision of goals, your strategies to achieve them, your current actions and their outcomes, and what is going on in the world around. It also means noticing and amending, either through action or internal revision or both, incongruities between these components of your lived inquiry.

Such action inquiry will have its idiosyncratic private strands, its shared and face-to-face strands with people at home and at work, and its more collective strands within organisations and the wider culture. It will involve phases of intentional, aware living; with time out for phases of collaborative reflection, review and goal setting. The totality of all this, applied within each of the several strands of social life, is what I call a self-generating culture. The concept of the learning organization points in this direction (Garratt, 1987) as does a wide range of recent work on community building (Gozdz, 1995).

Torbert, working within the field of management training, presents a similar notion. For him, personal action inquiry 'aims at creating communities of inquiry within communities of social practice'. It exhibits 'transforming power' which 'operates through peer cultures, liberating structures, and timely actions. Cultures are truly peer-like, structures are liberating, and actions are timely, if they simultaneously promote widening inquiry about what is the appropriate mission, strategy, and practice for the given person or organization or nation, while accomplishing established objectives in an increasingly efficient, effective and self-legitimising manner' (Torbert, 1991: 100).

A 'liberating structure' within an organization is one in which there is a sense of shared purpose among its members, an increasing self-direction among them, and a commitment to generate quality work by them. It is a structure which simultaneously cultivates among its members both quality improvement in their work on the one hand and action inquiry and personal development on the other. 'If liberating structures succeed organizational members will increasingly take executive responsibility, will increasingly treat one another as peers, and will increasingly create their own liberating structures' (Torbert, 1991: 100). In short, they manifests the values of autonomy, co-operation and empowering hierarchy.

For Torbert, the leader who exercises transforming power to bring a liberating structure into being essentially invites mutuality and participation in power. This is similar to my notion of empowering hierarchy which serves the flourishing of autonomy and co-operation. Thus any

practitioner exercising this kind of empowering hierarchy, will take initiatives for and on behalf of other interested practitioners, and will invite them to participate in a professional community in which the values of autonomy and co-operation are paramount.

Part 4

A self-generating practitioner community
A healthy practitioner community is one, then, that is self-managed in the spirit of a self-generating culture, a liberating social structure. Such a self-generating community of practitioners includes a selection of strands from the society-wide version. It particularly attends to three clusters. In characterising these I am, again, not making prescriptions, but putting forward my own contribution to a dialogue with other practitioners with similar sorts of values. I have had experience, in one context or another, of all the different forms I describe below.
The first cluster deals with basic social structure and process.
  • Forms of association.
    • Local face-to-face self and peer review groups of practitioners within a loose federation.
    • A federation characterized by a commitment of all participating groups to the values of autonomy and co-operation within each group and between groups.
    • Elected federation officers exercising the kind of empowering hierarchy that enhances autonomy and co-operation within and between local groups.
  • Forms of decision-making and political participation.
    • A form of co-operative decision-making within a group in which each person has a voice which is heard, in which authentic differences are affirmed, and in which there is a commitment to a creatively negotiated outcome. The same applies to federal decision-making between groups.
    • Decisions about basic policy and practice, to do with the main activities of practitioners in association with other practitioners, are made heterogeneously and idiosyncratically within each group.
    • Dialogue, exchange and conference among local groups, is further to enlarge and extend the autonomy and co-operation within each of them, not to achieve homogeneity, standardisation and conformity between them.

The second cluster attends to the main activities of the practitioner community.
  • Forms of supervision and quality control. In all these forms, the role of the peers is to enable each individual rigorously to deepen the integrity of her or his self-appraisal.
    • Varieties of peer supervision with regard to professional practice, using self and peer feedback, assessment and review. Feedback is informative, assessment is evaluative, and review is revisionary. I describe several different kinds of peer supervision in *Group Facilitation: Theories and Models for Practice* (Heron, 1993).
    • More formal peer review audit, in which: the main components of the job are identified and revised; the criteria of professional competence with respect to these components are identified and revised; the practitioners do on-the-job self- (and where possible peer) assessment of their competence applying these criteria and keeping records of the assessments; the practitioners meet periodically in an audit group to present these on-the-job findings and to process them by self and peer assessment. A full description of this sort of peer review audit is given in the same book (Heron, 1993).
  • Forms of research.
    • Varieties of participative research, in which research is done with people, not on them or about them. Co-operative inquiry, which I practice and about which I have written, breaks down the distinction between researcher and subject. All those involved are co-researchers, doing the thinking that designs, manages and draws conclusions from the research. They are also co-subjects, engaged in the experience and action which are the focus of the inquiry. They move cyclically several times between reflecting and planning as co-researchers, and action and experience as co-subjects. And they use a variety of validity procedures to secure the process

against uncritical subjectivity, consensus collusion and other hazards of the method (Reason, 1988; Heron, 1996).
  • Co-operative inquiry can be applied to all forms of peer supervision or peer review audit, and of continuing professional education, raising them up into systematic research into professional practice. It can also be used by pracitioner-client pairs and groups, and by client-only groups, to explore relevant concerns and interests. Its strength is that it is a form of research that fully honours personal autonomy and group collaboration.
  • Forms of continuing education and development.
  • Practitioners need to attend to their own ongoing professional education and personal development, through the whole range of adult education and growth strategies: conferences, seminars, peer teaching and learning, literature and Internet searches, training workshops, co-counselling, individual sessions, ongoing experiential groups, and so on.

And the third cluster deals with supportive processes.
  • Forms of conflict resolution.
  • Psychotherapists are notorious for incompetence in committee and bizarre forms of factionalism and infighting (Young, 1996). A healthy practitioner community could address this propensity by working out and agreeing, within each local group, forms of dispute and conflict resolution. These forms need to separate out authentic and honourable differences that are to be properly acknowledged and accommodated, from misunderstanding, misrepresentation, manipulation, and unaware projection of unprocessed distress.
  • Forms of ceremony and ritual.
  • A practitioner community, as a systemic whole, has an ethos which transcends any purely linguistic description of its values, norms and beliefs. This ethos of a body of practice can be felt. It can be grasped imaginally and intuitively. It can be invoked through metaphor and indicated by symbolic presentations. Above all, it can be honoured corporately by the use of creatively devised ceremony and ritual.

This kind of self-generating practitioner community is grounded in relatively small peer groups in which the basic processes of self and peer review, and co-operative inquiry, can proceed effectively. With its basic values of autonomy, co-operation and empowering hierarchy, such a community affirms the principle that in the last analysis all authority about practice rests with each practitioner's well-informed discriminating judgement, a precious metal refined within the crucible of rigorous peer process.

Part 5

Ending with starts
I began this chapter with some axiology, a consideration of value, in particular with the idea of what is intrinsically worthwhile, an end in itself. I'll conclude it with some ontology, thoughts about the nature of reality, in particular with the idea of innovative reality, the reality of new starts.
      Revisionary thinking across a wide array of disciplines from physics and biology, through medicine to social science and consciousness research, is articulating a new paradigm worldview. This differs in fundamental respects from the old paradigm positivist account – inherited from Descartes, Newton and others – of reality as an objective physical world, independent of the human mind, which we can all set about studying as if it had nothing to do with us. There are various overlapping ways of characterising the new worldview, and here is my account of three of them:
  • Reality is transactional, relational, to do with dynamic interconnectedness.
  • Reality is subjective-objective, a transaction between the human mind and the cosmically given, in which persons participate in what there is without separation from it, and in the process shape it perceptually and conceptually (Skolimowski, 1994; Heron, 1996).
  • This reality, co-created by the mind and the given cosmos which it conjoins, is in process of emergent evolution, which is unpredictable and innovative, generating new starts.

One wing of the new paradigm is the science of complexity, or complexity theory, which seeks to give a comprehensive account of the emergence of creativity and innovation in the dynamics of complex systems in nature and culture. It is a recent development which claims wide relevance, from the weather and ecosystems to elaborate human societies (Lewin, 1993; Goodwin, 1994). Reason and Goodwin (1997), in an interesting paper on complexity theory and co-operative inquiry, take six principles of complexity theory and use them as metaphors for what goes on in a co-operative inquiry. These principles can also be used as metaphors for what happens in the kind of self-generating practitioner community (SGPC) which I have outlined above. In saying that this is what happens, I am extrapolating from my experience, in diverse contexts, of the different forms I have included within my account of an SGPC.

• Complex systems have variegated, multiple patterns of interconnections between diverse components. The interconnections are not simple and uniform. This is a precondition of the emergence of unpredictable novelty.

   The SGPC form of association, with its loose federation of local groups, has a rich diversity of ways in which autonomy and co-operation interact both within and between the local groups.

• In complex systems, novelty arises by the repetition of cycles of a regular pattern of activity, in which both convergent and divergent processes interact.

   Within an SGPC, the use of both peer supervision and of co-operative inquiry involves repeated cycles of activity within which there will be innumerable varied patterns, both concurrent and serial, of converging on the same and diverging over the different. Thus everyone explores the the same issue, but each a different aspect of it; or everyone explores a different issue, but each the same dimension of it; and so on.

• The order that emerges in a complex system cannot be predicted from the nature of the interconnected entities that comprise it. It can only be discovered by going through the cyclic processes that constitute it.

   The order within an SGPC consists of the values, criteria, beliefs and procedures related to the professional practice of its members. These cannot be derived by some process of abstraction from the views of individual members. They can only be discovered by their emergence through the cyclic processes of self and peer review within local groups, and as between local groups.

• The novel order that emerges in a complex system is holistic. It results from the interactions among constitutive parts of the system. It is not determined by the properties of a privileged set of parts, by preordained instructions coded in them. It is the dynamic interconnectedness of the whole that has the potential for emergent novelty.

   An SGPC does not have a central privileged committee that shapes policy and controls the organization of the profession. It is the dynamic relations within and between its loosely federated local groups that gives rise to its innovative order.

• Complex systems are characterized by variable and transient fluctuations between between chaos and order, which at a certain point may lead over into the emergence of complex and novel organization. The fluctuations may also go the other way and involve a transition from some degree of initial organization to chaos.

   The organization of an SGPC fluctuates between chaos and order. The members of an SGPC live and work within this fluctuation awarely as part of the challenge of being co-creators within emergent innovative evolution.

• A complex system is most adaptive, flexible and innovative when it is at the edge of chaos where large fluctuations between chaos and order occur, since it is here where novel order emerges.

   An SGPC is continuously involved, through autonomous self and peer review groups, in a deeply grounded revisionary exploration of its members' professional practice. They put all at risk by moving away from the security of established and authoritative definitions of practice, and by moving toward self and peer definitions, attending rigorously to their own experience. They may flounder at times in the rough seas of uncertainty, confusion and chaos, before spacious new continents arise from the depths.

There is, of course, nothing sacrosanct about complexity theory, itself part of the emergent process it seeks to describe. But for those of us who have worked with autonomy and co-operation within peer groups of various kinds, there is an interesting isomorphic resonance at work. And the kind of SGPC I have derived from a consideration of intrinsically worthwhile ends of action- as well as, it must be said, from a great deal of practice – is consonant with the new paradigm worldview that affirms a participative reality of emergent starts.

By contrast it seems that the overcontrol of professional practice by centralised bureaucracy, evident in much current psychotherapy professionalisation, is very much an expression of the old paradigm worldview. Positivist science regards the whole as the mechanical sum of its parts. Specialist experts divide a domain into its simple parts which can then be intellectually and technically managed to gain control over the whole. This breeds a rigid and restricted view of what constitutes reality, since it has no way of honouring the creative emergence of novelty.

If a group of senior and specialist practitioners analyse the whole field of psychotherapy and counselling into its component parts – the numerous schools and modes of practice – and then use this analysis to devise a way of managing and controlling and organizing the whole, there can only be one result: a rigid and restricted view of human helping, with no way of honouring creative helping at the forward edge of evolutionary emergence.

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