

Summer – a sustaining transaction

HAYLEY MARSHALL shares a sense of ‘minding her landscape’ as she walks out in high summer.

AS MY OUTDOOR psychotherapy work developed since its beginnings in 2007, I crafted a regular practice of ‘minding my landscape.’ This involves going out and walking my local topography into my body/mind/psyche while also reflecting on the process in terms of its potential for psychotherapy. I originally wrote these seasonal columns back in 2013/14 to share some of these wanderings/wonderings.

IT'S HIGH SUMMER; and as I walk up an old road towards the moorland of the Goyt Valley, the land is responding to the persistent sun by releasing a dusty haze. The going is slow and arduous, with the bedrock here pouring from the land to reclaim its prominence. The track is strewn with gritstone boulders and rubble.

I cut across the moor to the left, my destination; a sonorous drone in the distance. The glowering mass of Axe Edge is an eminent ridge that local people are drawn to in order to witness the June solstice. This apex of the year is one time when significant connection to local landscape is distinct in people's minds. Today a recent loss in my life is on my mind, and I too feel an urge to connect with the solidity and consistency of the surrounding landforms, albeit for a different reason. While this is undoubtedly about seeking solace, it also involves a need to incorporate an enduring sense of support. This is landscape as elemental sustenance.

In therapeutic terms I relate this to aspects of the Winnicottian concept of the holding environment, as written about by Ogden (2004). He refers to one aspect of holding as ‘the means by which the sense of continuity of being is sustained over time’; and, as ‘an unobtrusive state of “coming together in one place” that has both a psychological and physical dimension’.

Clearly, I am broadening this concept beyond the intrapsychic and interpersonal spaces concerning the human to human relationship, to include sustaining

interactions with the wider context of the natural environment. In this instance, I bring to the foreground the ongoing presence and structures of landscape, as enduring reference points; functioning as a ‘gathering place’ for parts of us that need integrating; and that can, over time, be incorporated in the body-mind as an internal holding environment.

Back on the moor, I lean in to the gradient and my physiology fires up as I engage with the strain of climbing. I begin to breathe fast and reflect on how one aspect of the development of this holding environment seems to involve an internalisation of the shape of the land. This is a kind of embodied storying (storing), achieved through walking the local topography into my body-mind. I am absorbing the contours as I walk, building an internal structural map. It forms part of a practice I term ‘minding my landscape’ (Marshall, 2016), and one that I find immensely sustaining. In my view this perspective is important for thinking about mental well-being generally; in terms of how some people may develop and access a more expansive sense of relational support in their lives, via forming an embodied connection with their local terrain.

A related process is evident in nature-based psychotherapy, where clients can explore different aspects of the landscape to match and illuminate their internal experience. This is an intervention that is important in terms of the client feeling supported by the environment that the therapy takes place in. What is less apparent is that the therapist too will usually experience the place as providing a significant holding for their counter-transferential experiences and for the therapeutic work. For both members of the dyad, this typically results in the formation of a strong bond with the ‘therapeutic place’.

Arriving on the summit I sit, relaxing in the presence of permanence; the hills steadily asserting their authority. I savour the panoramic view of the peaks cradling my home; this wonderful visual metaphor instilling a more expansive sense of my feeling held by this environment. I am also mindful that direct contact with what Robert Macfarlane calls the ‘grand vistas of time and space’, offers me an opportunity to reach for new perspectives, not least on my experience of the loss I walked out with.

On a final note, it occurs to me that the view I express

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here entails understanding the physical environment much more as part of our identity; a way of being that in westernized cultures we seem to have lost touch with, certainly on any conscious level. I believe that 'minding our landscape' also has implications for us developing more reciprocal relationships with the natural world; for, as a connective practice, it inherently invokes care for the place. Overall, this amounts to what I would term a sustaining transaction, where both individual and environment are potentially nourished by the contact.

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Autumn – relational by nature

After a static morning at the computer
HAYLEY MARSHALL heads outside and
steps into the flow of autumn

I HAVE COME to a halt. A static fug has ushered itself into my mind and body, the dispiriting legacy of a morning at the computer. In my etherised state, I half-heartedly decide to head for what might be called some 'nearby nature' (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). For me this is the local allotments which open out onto a piece of farmland on the south side of town.

With harvest in full swing, this cultivating environment is brimming with conspicuous creaturely activity. Humans and animals alike are engaged with the earth; reaping and replenishing autumn nourishment. I observe all of this, yet remain untouched, and feel detached. So, I pass on by, out into the fields.

Drifting along, I resonate with the outdoor therapeutic process for those client groups who are depressed or withdrawn and are experiencing a significant deadening of aspects of their experience. For them, initially, outdoor therapy involves contacting more directly the ways in which that deadening is very much 'alive' for them.

Recalling this on my walk, I am dimly aware that the removed world continues to happen around me, but nothing is happening for me, or so I think. On reaching a stone wall I decide to sit awhile and wait.

A throaty cawing cuts into the air some way above. Looking up, I notice a vague mistiness in the sky as the inky black of the crow blots its way into the distance. Then, as though emerging from beneath a lifting veil, I gradually sense the autumnal air carrying its augur of chill. Essence of wood smoke unfurling within a lingering dampness brings further awakening.

With these tantalising whispers of scent, the world shifts through me and – finally – I catch the turning of the season. Climbing over the wall, I begin to move on.

In my experience, connection with the web of sentient beings and living processes in a natural environment can help awaken our emotional, psychological, and ecological awareness. Through sustained exposure to the natural

world we are prompted to open ourselves to new experience – to breathe the flow of life into our halting script processes. Out in the world 'anything can happen'; and so, both the creative ways in which we hold the world at bay, as well as new prospects can be clearly felt and explored. Nature, it appears, helps to promote 'movement from fixity to changingness, from rigid structure to flow, from stasis to process' (Tudor & Worrall 2006).

So, this is the heart of the relational project in outdoor psychotherapy – promotion of what I would call a process-oriented focus. With this I refer to the fact that the presence of a 'living third' (Jordan and Marshall 2010) in the therapeutic dynamic invites both therapist and client into an active expansive relational dialogue with each other and the non-human world. Potentially far beyond two person psychologies (Stark 1999), this is a dynamic 'contextual psychology' (Wachtel 2008), whereby the perpetual relationality in the living context can promote a fully-fledged fluidity between inner and outer experience.

In practice this involves the therapeutic dyad encountering the vagaries of the weather, terrain, animals, plant-life, and other human beings; and attending to the manner in which these are met, along with the associated conscious, unconscious, and non-conscious meanings and experiences evoked. The multidirectional lived world of 'we-in-context' relating (Tudor 2011); and has the effect of imbuing the client's script process with a 'here-and-now' immediacy that, if well caught by the therapist, can promote embodied relational insight, connection and engagement. In effect this is the casting of new relational light into our innermost sanctuary of stasis, and as such, is a fundamental aspect of personal transformation.

Returning to the world in my walk, I am now feeling the need to go back and revisit the vibrancy of the allotments. Along the way, hearing a farmer calling to the nearby slumbering sheep, I stand still as they rise up and sprint across the scrubby field to receive the food he has to offer. Another kind of awakening perhaps, but with the dissipation of my morning torpor I now savour the flow of these constant happenings immediately around me; feeling, quite literally, moved by them.

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