

Greening the Adult ego state

HAYLEY MARSHALL begins her seasonal column at the winter solstice

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 for *the Transactional Analyst* back in 2013/14 to share some of these wanderings/wonderings.

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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 into 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 while 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' quietens 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 (Marshall, 2016). 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

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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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