

# PLANTING AN OAK IN A FLOWERPOT

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'Knowing' is a fetish. It gives us brief comfort against life's inherent uncertainty. Socratic 'not-knowing' is another, 'softer' kind of fetish, at times adopted by psychotherapists and Dharma practitioners alike to heighten our humanistic and religious credentials. This chapter explores – via a case study, a reading of Dōgen's notion of pilgrimage (hansan), and elements of Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* – a form of 'not-knowing' that points towards the unknowable.

Several traditions speak of the unknowable, using different names: the organism, the unconscious, the ultimate. By resisting a sectarian compulsion to reify any of these notions and claim direct and exclusive access to them, we may avoid the literalism of religion. By exploring them freely, we may also avoid the secularist fallacy of explaining the world away and absurdly attempting, as Heathcliff says in *Wuthering Heights*, – to 'plant an oak in a flowerpot'.

## **The White Room (Jenny's dream)**

I am a guest in Tony's house, but the house looks bigger and with one or two extra floors at the top. Tony's entire extended family is here. His wife, a banker, talks animatedly on her mobile in French, looking busy and important. I'm shown a small, pleasant room, with a Futon on the floor: I'm going to sleep here during my weekend visit. I understand why I'm here: I've been given (implicitly) an important task. I must enter a room haunted by Tony's brother, who died a while ago. I must speak to the ghost and set him free. The room is white and utterly empty. To enter, I must go through two separate doors with a space in the middle. When I get there, I feel an agonizing cold all over me; I am gripped by terror. Even so, I want to keep on, perform my task and prove my spiritual prowess to myself and Tony. But the cold is too intense and the spectral presence – now ever so tangible, ominous – overpowers me. I rush out to my room, where I collapse on the mattress, weeping.

A moment later, Tony comes in and lies next to me; he would like to comfort me but doesn't know how to. He just can't understand my pain. We are both half naked. I worry

what his wife and the rest of the family may think, seeing us lying there. I am nervous they will find out about our affair. Tony's two brothers come in, followed by his sister. Lunch is ready and we are all expected downstairs.

I have a revelation: I see how Tony wants me there so that things will precipitate, come to a head, and find a dramatic resolution without him having to do a thing. With his family finally learning about the affair, everything will irremediably change for the better. My presence acts as a catalyst. Exhausted as well as upset by this insight, I want to leave but I can't move. I pause for a few minutes. Then I get up and take a long breath. I gather all my courage and run out of the door.

Outside it's already dark. Fear has left me and I walk lightly, happy and unnoticed among the anonymous passerby. Climbing up the granite steps from a familiar square, I wonder what has changed: 'I never ever believed in ghosts – I say quietly to myself – but now I'm not so sure'.

That night Jenny woke up sweating and in her very bones she felt the dream carried an important message. She told me so two days later at one of her weekly sessions. The dream also marked a shift in therapy. She had been Tony's lover for the past six months – both of them married, but seeking something more; both managing to keep it going somehow, in spite of the difficulties: the convoluted logistics, but also the very palpable remorse that she (more than he) felt, carrying the burden, as she put it, for both. She knew her dream marked something momentous, but what? 'To get out, perhaps?' – I suggested. It was obvious to me, but made a point to sound tentative. 'Sure ... maybe', she said, 'but there is something else here, hard to grasp; I want to know more, I want to understand'. For my part, I couldn't quite bracket my conviction that a married woman having an affair with a married man wasn't such a smart idea and that there would be misery for all concerned. I did try the *epoché* thing, the phenomenological reduction, or suspension of judgement. I tried to be the Merleau-Pontian perpetual beginner, something I advocate in lectures and papers. But didn't the great Maurice say that it is precisely by attempting to practising it that the suspension is shown as an impossible task?

Whatever the case may be, the one thing that persisted was the image of that white room, so vividly rendered by Jenny, as well as the strangely concrete, semi-corporeal presence of the ghost. Jenny never actually saw the ghost in her dream, but his presence was pervasive. The palpitations and the cold sweat had been real enough. She conveyed them so directly that I had also felt the icy shiver. Did the ghost *stand for* something, I wondered sheepishly

(guiltily even, for how can a self-confessed phenomenologist ever be lured by the siren of symbolism and symbolic interpretation?) I believe that dream phenomena are not to be read as hieroglyphs, whose true meaning patiently awaits my allegedly expert decoding, or as symbols replacing the barren existence of things & people, but ought to be discerned instead as direct, thoroughly demystified and very real experience.

Both Jenny and I felt stuck, in spite of two sessions dedicated to being with the dream and staying open to its meaning.

### **An Oak in a Flowerpot**

Emily was the most philosophically-minded among the Brontë children, and her *Wuthering Heights* “goes straight to the heart of the question of agency and freedom” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 607). Way beyond the cliché that anesthetises it as Gothic literary entertainment, the novel remains positively disturbing in its portrayal of possibilities outside the static teleology of Christian and moral love. The love between Heathcliff and Catherine soars above the static telos of religiosity, affirming the greater import of human agency and freedom over the domesticated effusions given by Linton, whom Catherine ends up marrying, a man whose attempts at dealing with the daimon of love are akin to planting an oak in a flowerpot.

The world, the suggestion is, will always remain a Hell if we are allowed to aim at redemption from it, rather than at the amelioration of life within it, and led to anticipate the end of striving, rather than to respect the dignity of the striving itself (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 607)

This is not the place to elaborate on ethics and its relation to aesthetics and to muse whether in fact seeing the former as a branch of the latter might help wrangle it from the religious stronghold (as well as the secular/utilitarian one) in which it remains caught (Bazzano, 2012). But it might be useful to register that the passional and passionate *event* called ‘Heathcliff and Catherine’ points at an aesthetics – hence is ‘para-ethical’ (Surin, 2011):

“There is no schema of evaluation (the requisite hallmark of ethics) within which the event of ‘Heathcliff and Catherine’ can be contained in order to make it explicable and seemingly rational” (Ibid, p. 150).

A mediocre commentator will appreciate the splendour and ‘entertainment value’ of this tragic love. In the same way perhaps the average therapist will welcome the usefulness of the clinical material his client’s upheavals represent in fostering an existing – and anodyne – ‘body of knowledge’.

### **Love at Last Sight**

‘A married woman having an affair with a married man isn’t a smart idea’. This thought, lodged in the back of my mind unchecked (let alone ‘bracketed’) was also, as it turned out, Jenny’s own thought. One bright December morning, a week after her dream, she decided to end it with Tony. She had met him the previous day in a cafe and asked him out of the blue what it’d be like for him if one day it were to end, and he responded, rather plainly she thought, ‘Well, you know, I’d be sad’. She didn’t want to wait until he could meet him face to face so she phoned, and was glad to get his voicemail. Her message was to the point, she said, but by no means unkind.

Only later, Jenny told me, she understood what that strange phrase meant, the one she had found in Walter Benjamin’s writings: ‘love at last sight’. She was ‘all jumbled emotions’ and understood that it didn’t matter that it was secret and short-lived and doomed to failure. For one thing, the pain made it holy. Its fleetingness did not in any way denigrate it. Listening to her, I felt at a loss. I couldn’t think straight. Only now, with hindsight, I can begin to put into words the dim, conflicting thoughts and feelings I had at the time.

Can I, as a therapist, suspend my moral judgement on what is right and wrong? The love Tony and Jenny have for each other (I say ‘have’ in the present because they got together a month later) – however complicated and potentially disruptive – burns in the purity of its flame. Yes, it goes against ‘conscience’. Erotic passion is the meeting point of the *unknown* and the *uncommitted*. But what do we find at the opposite pole if not the idealization of love and the denial of the erotic? And the sanctification of domestic boredom and routine, the altar to which many of us sacrifice our *jouissance* – a notion not only virtually untranslatable in contemporary English, but unfathomable in our current cultural climate. Unless psychotherapy is the last bastion of bourgeois morality and our task as practitioners to educate the wayward pilgrims to the rightful path. But what is the rightful path? And what do I really know of the mysterious ways in which love operates?

I conveyed my hopelessness to Jenny and suggested we go back to square one. I did not admit openly of my disapproval of her affair, or of the obscure, irrational jealousy I had felt.

Yes, I now realize that I forgot to mention this: before meeting Tony, she had fallen in love with me. Textbook transference: sensitive, good-looking, intelligent client who did not experience the same level of intimacy before inevitably falls for her therapist who hides behind the screen of clinical jargon and knowing; who hides behind the screen of Socratic/Platonic ‘not-knowing’; who cannot admit to himself (and his supervisor) how flattered he feels, how galvanized that someone finds *him* (with his little life of boring academic chores, average client work and serialized American dramas from *lovefilm* as almost his sole source of amusement) interesting. Who forgets Freud’s self-deprecating witticism: nothing to do with his ‘irresistible charm’.

Never mind. I more or less expertly helped unravel and bypass the sticky phase of our therapeutic work by focusing on the task at hand: her process, her ‘growth’ (how I hate that word, as if people were vegetables!), her return to a ‘healthier’ state, away from flirtations, vagaries and infatuations. The thing is, I am not so sure anymore – of what I am as a therapist, of what therapy is supposed to do. Perhaps someone will tell me. Perhaps someone will *clarify* it for me. Even though “to suppose that clarity proves anything about truth is perfect childishness” (Nietzsche, 1968: 538). Even though I can’t help feeling that not-knowing (or the askesis of *at-tempt*-ing, giving in to the *tempt*-ation of not-knowing) momentarily exempts me from the obligation to join the psychotherapeutic, philosophical and religious choir that compels us all to cry in unison for order out of chaos, for implausible ‘facts’ against our endless and necessary mediations, for ‘evidence’ and, finally, for *truth as conformity*, ie the preservation of a set of historical prejudices to which we subscribe. Against this self-satisfied and self-created ‘world’, abnormality, distress and even abjection begin to take on distinctly *soulful* traits.

### **Learning, a.k.a. Being Affected**

I am personally aware of two kinds of ‘not-knowing’ – one stemming from Socratic/Platonic philosophy and one from the Zen tradition.

Socratic not-knowing – a welcome change from scientific ambitions of all-conquering knowledge – is by far the more influential of the two and appears to overtly and covertly inform attempts within the Tradition to curb our Promethean lust for subjugating and explaining away what surpasses limited human understanding.

This style of not-knowing has gained currency within some therapeutic orientations alongside Socratic questioning (based on Socrates’ style of dialogue). Based on an understanding of learning as *maieutics*, ie midwifery, this notion is ingrained in the fabric of

our thinking: the word *education* comes from the *Latin educere*, to draw out. According to this paradigm, the expert therapist/philosopher/educator draws out and brings to light, through skilled questioning at the edge of awareness, the jumbled fragments of the client's dormant wisdom. Expertise, far from being a mark of authority, is employed in the service of the client's well-being and self-determination. This model relies on a Platonic view of the human soul and on a 'classical', pre-phenomenological view of *psyche* as an apparatus separate from the world rather than embedded within it. There is however another perspective, according to which education is "no longer [understood] as extracting pre-existent knowledge and wisdom but instead as the product of an encounter with otherness" (Bazzano, 2012: 6). Championed and beautifully argued by Levinas (1961), this view has gained currency within the *Counter-tradition* (Madison, 1981), giving birth to a *radical ethics* of alterity (Critchley, 2007; Agamben, 1998; Butler, 2004; Derrida, 2001; Bazzano, 2012) that did not simply rest on Levinas' valuable insights but has gone well beyond its limitations.

According to what it is still a work-in-progress model, learning occurs when we take more fully into account *exteriority*. 'Education' then comes to mean being deeply *affected* and impacted by the presence of the other. I have sketched this idea in the first chapter of a recent book (Bazzano, 2012), highlighting the profound link between identity and otherness. Our identity is constructed against otherness. One could say that there is no such thing as interiority, for a thorough examination of the nature of the self reveals its non-substantiality as well as its ineffability. When we look closely, we do not find a thing we can call the self, an entity distinct from phenomena. Consciousness itself emerges from phenomena. The notion I have of myself is another phenomenon just as the traffic noise, the muffled sound of rain on this cold winter day. I simply cannot know myself as a solid and separate entity. This 'I' too belongs to exteriority. I am external to myself, unknowable to myself; a stranger to myself. This I itself belongs to otherness. *Je est un autre*: I is another, Rimbaud's famous phrase is open to several meanings. Identity begins to falter as my observation becomes more precise.

A perspective rooted in otherness overturns the Platonic idea of maieutics and the very meaning of experience. The process of education is then no longer seen as extracting pre-existent knowledge and wisdom but instead as the product of a genuine encounter with otherness.

Conversely, Socrates' 'I know only that I do not know' is essentially a dialectical trick, a way to pre-empt the interlocutor's potential criticism by admitting one's ignorance from the start. It also betrays reverence for knowledge itself, conspicuous by its very denial. This sort of 'not-knowing', dominant in western thought, is a form of rational and dialectical sophism which betrays false modesty.

### **I Don't Know Nothing**

The other type of not-knowing can be illustrated by the following Zen kōan:

Dizang asked Fayan: "Where are you going?"

Fayan said: "Around on a pilgrimage"

Dizang said: "What is the purpose of pilgrimage?"

Fayan said: "I don't know"

Dizang said: "Not knowing is nearest" (Cleary, 1990, p. 86)

'Not knowing is nearest': one arrives at this kind of not knowing having travelled far and wide, having left no stone unturned. It is a profound admission of defeat – a defeat which might well be our only hope for it precludes the abdication of the notion of a Promethean, self-sufficient identity, of one's valiantly delusional dreams of conquest in a yet-to-be-colonized wilderness.

In another *kōan*, not-knowing is presented as *blindness*:

Tan Hsia asked a monk, "Where have you come from?" The monk said, "From down the mountain." Hsia said, "Have you eaten yet or not?" The monk said, "I have finished." Hsia said, "Did the person who brought you the food to eat have eyes or not?" The monk was speechless.

Ch'ang Ch'ing asked Pao Fu, "To give someone food to eat is ample requital of the debt of kindness: why wouldn't he have eyes?" Fu said, "Giver and receiver are both blind." Ch'ang Ch'ing said, "If they exhausted their activity, would they still turn out blind?" Fu said, "Can you say that I'm blind?" (Cleary & Cleary, 1992: 418)

Many commentaries of this famous kōan focus on degrees of blindness, or 'not-knowing'. *Bonkatsu* is ignorance plain and simple, our ordinary deluded state in the shopping mall of samsara. Then there is *jakatsu*, a sort of articulated, well-informed and academic stupidity:

we can't experience life simply because of the amount of learned garbage we have accumulated over the years. Next, we have *mikatsu*, the blindness of one who is devoted to practice but is still deluded – too attached, perhaps, to a literal understanding of the teachings. Then there is *shôkatsu* – we begin to grasp that there is nothing to grasp, nothing to see. At last, there is *shinkatsu*, 'true blindness', the point when all talk of liberation and delusion is utterly meaningless.

Seung Sahn said:

I don't teach Korean or Mahayana or Zen. I don't even teach Buddhism. I only teach *don't know*. Fifty years here and there teaching only *don't know*. So only *don't know*, okay? (Seung, 2009)

Unknowing begins with disenchantment – a necessary rite of passage, recognizing the futility of knowledge, seeing through this fetish of power and acquisition. Disenchantment implies being no longer under the spell, no more subject to the compulsion to own an esoteric/exoteric glossary and a vocabulary of seemingly solid reference points. It means realizing how pointless the acquisition of a specialized jargon truly is.

This undermining of knowledge often comes, in Buddhist as in psychotherapeutic circles, with the privileging of a supposedly 'higher' form of expertise. Among Buddhists, this takes the form of 'party tricks', ie the fixation with *janas*, with intense and pleasurable states of mental absorption and altered states of consciousness. Among counsellors and psychotherapists, it transposes expertise into 'subtler' domains: the interpersonal, the interpretative and the quasi-mystical notions of 'presence', 'relational depth' and so forth.

### **Pilgrimage as encounter**

The notion of pilgrimage (*hansan*), central in Dōgen's writings and discourses, refers to both literal journeys (going to a distant monastery in order to meet a teacher and learn from him) and symbolic ones (studying and practising the Dharma). What is common to both is *encounter*. The Dharma is for Dōgen encounter. If it does not reach the heart of ordinary people, our link with the teachings becomes a yoke or, at times, an embellishment. I have to encounter the Dharma, decide for myself to face what Zen calls *the grave matter of life and*

*death*. I have to go on a pilgrimage and face something entirely other: a teacher, a text, fellow travellers who also undertook this exhilarating journey.

This is not the acquisition of esoteric knowledge, the refinement of a particular way of being, the ability to engage in dialectical Dharma combat in the meditation hall (or at dinner parties) nor the attunement to ‘presence’. Instead, the accomplished Zen practitioner and/or psychotherapist is on his way to become a complete idiot. For it takes an idiot to commit to Dharma practice – a practice which has no purpose and offers no gain. And it takes an even bigger idiot to teach it.

Likewise, it takes an idiot to ask perfectly obvious questions in therapy, the ones, for instance, which Spinelli (2007) refers to as “descriptive challenges” (pp 122-27), requiring a degree of “investigative stillness” in order to challenge “the client’s worldview so that its implicit dispositional stances are made more explicit” (ibid, p 123):

There cannot be real dialogue without questioning, revisiting and examining anew a worldview, a particular condition or dilemma, the causes and import of a form of anguish.

All our professional training is the springboard for this – creating a relationship of mutual learning where we are both affected, where we can experience the world anew. It sounds easy enough except that it isn’t. It is scary, for it means letting go of our knowledge and expertise. Watch this space...

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