

Sheep of Tomorrow

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Abstract This fictional essay assembles the fragments of a learning journal written by an anonymous person-centred therapist-in-training, discovered by the author in the bin of a fictional therapy institute called Macondo. It reveals unprocessed and unsupervised musings, reflections, and speculations. Whilst not complying with the written and unwritten rules of journal writings – let alone academic essay writing – these passages proclaim, in their own unassuming, even uncouth ways, a slight yet hopefully valuable treasure trove of experiences that normally goes below the radar of officious person-centred training and learning.

Introduction

[The persons of tomorrow] have an antipathy for any highly structured, inflexible, bureaucratic institution. They believe that institutions should exist for people, not the reverse. [...] These persons have a trust in their own experience and a profound distrust of external authority. They make their own moral judgments, even openly disobeying laws that they consider unjust (Rogers, 1980, p. 351).

Still, when illusions burn out, they leave embers.
(De Benedetto, 2017, p. 175)

The author of this person-centred learning journal, left in the kitchen bin on the ground floor of the *Macondo Institute*, a therapy training centre sited in affluent suburbia, would be surprised at seeing its publication, even in the heavily edited version you are about to read. None of the four notebooks – pale brown cover of the sort they sell at *Muji* bound together with an elastic band, wrapped in an orange *Sainsbury's* carrier bag – bear a name, a contact number or a postal/email address. My first, sagacious thought was to leave the bundle where I had found it. A moment later I thought to hand it in at reception. In the end, a fiercer, less noble impulse prevailed: curiosity. Or perhaps something that was even less splendid: the

irresistible itch to unearth gossip, secrets or scandalous revelations. After all, although the diarist had thrown it away, he or she had not cared to destroy it and this, I thought wistfully, could only mean one thing: they had wanted someone to find it and read it.

At any rate, my decision to hold on to the notebooks for a while came after scanning, next to the kitchen bin, the first few words on the first page. I found them compelling – although, to be ‘entirely congruent’ (as they say around here) with *you*, my dear reader – I cannot say exactly *why* they were compelling. Enough. I knew only one thing: I wanted to read more, right away. I left Macondo’s premises with a spring in my step, pulling my hat lower to hide a conspiratorial smile, and obscured my face further by tucking it into the raised collar of my coat. I magically summoned, in short, all feasible platitudes, including the melancholy gathering of shadows on a drizzly and dreary November dusk.

I went to my favourite place a block away—a local Romanian cafe where the coffee is strong, where they don’t over-foam the milk nor draw daft heart-shapes to the chagrin of the newly heartbroken who come by after their weekly counselling session at the low-cost Macondo Counselling and Psychotherapy Services. In this cafe place all waitresses are pretty, and waiters handsome; here you can spot lonely punters stare in the distance wistfully while gay and hetero young couples share YouTube compilations as a way to share their love while unfriending expired lovers on Facebook.

I found a quiet table at the corner where the depressingly cheerful muzak could not reach my years; I ordered a double macchiato and started reading the first notebook, blissfully undisturbed. I found the reading captivating, to say the least, and I managed to read a good chunk of the entire journal there and then.

The following passages from the journal are arranged in chronological order. Words and sentences are unedited: intact and unpolished, given that the author was not writing for an

audience by solely for him/herself. The division in sections is arbitrary hence the narrative drive is entirely of my own making.

After eventually reading all four notebooks, I couldn't help feeling that I knew a little about the author. Presumptuous of me, but isn't ~~it~~ this what we do, even when we read fiction? We assume that most fiction is autobiographical and are compelled to look for the shameful revelation, the embarrassing detail, the fall from grace and the ordinary but potentially tragic illness that turns the hero into an ordinary human being who is allowed to become a hero again only if she or he has survived the addiction, crushed his/her demons, and declared readiness to sing along a narrow-minded tune. We seem to want a *pathography* rather than a fiction or a biography. But I am digressing, so I just take the opportunity to state the following disclaimer: 1) No person-centred therapist or trainee was harmed during the writing of this chapter. 2) My sincerest apologies to all sheep the world over for using the term of this gentle creature in the colloquial sense. No insult is meant; it's just that language sometime does not allow for subtleties and ambivalences.

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This is the Dawning of the Age of the Fish Bowl

8 September 2005

On the train back from the Introductory Course in Person-centred Counselling. A group of fourteen people. Tired; how come, given I've just sat all day talking and listening?

Question: What is my *potential*? Are the commuters in this crowded carriage on the Central Line (tourists, first-daters, bored couples with kids, old folks with newspapers, folks with their face illumined by the light on their mobile phone like medieval saints) *actualized*? Are tourists *more* actualized than commuters because they have more space to see and feel and imagine? And: am *I* actualized? I don't think so, though I could do with a holiday. Boy, I'm

getting paler by the minute. Here I am, anyway, learning: how to be a *peeeerson*, as this Glaswegian shrink said of Carl Rogers who is btw the head and founder of PCT when introducing him to his mates: 'This is Carl, he's not a man, he is a *peeeerson*'. This guy, whose name was Ronnie Laing, wrote great books they tell me and also loved his drink as well as Kierkegaard and also said that Carl, who's the Supreme Chief of this therapy thing, he said Carl wouldn't survive in a Glasgow pub. Which makes you think. Brings to mind that time in Harlesden when we played a Sunday gig in this noisy pub and they would talk loud all over our set, they showed no respect this bunch of middle class Sunday trippers and their boring girlfriends. So I kissed the mic with my lips up real close and shouted *Shut the fuck up!* They were startled and the bass player who is a gentleman looked at me like I was nuts which I was, really, with all the ganja in my Southern lungs etc. But really, now that I think of it: if I learn this PC therapy will I then become a super softy half-man/ half-frangipane who's scared shitless of his own shadow? Will I turn into one of those weedy men who have to ask their girlfriends first before they decide to do anything? Will I survive in a Glasgow pub or a Harlesden pub? I noticed the other men in the group today, there were four of us in all including me, all the others were women, twenty women and four men! I looked at the men and they had this apologetic look of moral resignation and they looked at the women with fear and awe and I was thinking what the f...? This guy then during 'group process' as they call it was 'sharing', which means talking openly and saying what you feel including private stuff. This guy said, I'm knackered, we had an argument last night and she shut me out of the house and won't let me in, but I *deserved* it, so I slept rough and it was cold though not really cold, we are only in September thank God, he said with a smile. Everybody was nodding meaningfully and he carried on and said the argument was nothing really but no, he said it wasn't nothing, it was important, she wants me to dedicate more time to her, doesn't like it when I read by myself or listen to music or just chill out. Thing is, he went on,

it's my flat and since she's moved in she took over, you know, all her things spread out in the living room and I don't get to watch documentaries or Herzog or Wenders anymore, she wants us to be together and watch *Strictly* and I hate it to be honest I fucking hate it as I'm strictly bored to death to watch that shit but then I think she's right maybe I'm too poncey for my shirt and I should like normal things. At this point the facilitator, Emma, said, looking empathically in the eyes of the sharing bloke whose name is John, she said 'Does anyone feel like taking a leap and be a counsellor to John for the next twenty minutes?' and so John and a volunteer, Gemma, brave of her I thought, sat in the middle which is called 'fish bowl' which btw made me laugh a little private laugh as I thought: Should I tell them now that I'm no tame little red fish in an aquarium and if they piss me off I can bite their head off? I was thinking my own thoughts rather than, you know, being in the zone, *presence* they call it which is big in these circles I think. So I drifted, which is not OK. I drifted and thought of the Age of Aquarius, aquariums as fish bowls, the world a better place if everyone was person-centred and doing regular fish-bowl all transparent like a Crystal Palace with no secrets and lies and stuff. Aquarium: ideal and peaceful and universal, shiny happy women and men holding hands around a campfire, humming OM or Halleluiah or La-di-dah and whatever turns you on and turns you into the Big Love. Bring it on! A future where everyone, having done lots of fish bowls and sharing and PC counselling, I mean *really* done those things, you know, not just going through the motions, having *really* done this stuff empathically and congruently and with generous helping of love and fraternal benevolence for our fellow beings in this Friendly Smiley Planet, which is also btw benevolently actualizing, a big well-meaning Organism floating among the stars and the moon and the soon and moving everyday towards greater clarity, consciousness and good behaviour, a Pally Planet actualizing as we speak, like everything else in existence if you see what I mean. This is not your average pub banter, btw it's cosmic stuff. Emma calls it *Formative Tendency*. Everything has a Purpose,

you know. You smoke your little smoke, drink your little drink, chew your silly spearmint but you have no idea do you little man? You have *no* fucking idea. You are *actually* actualizing, I'm telling you. And you could actualize a lot faster if you weren't a lazy sod. And did you know? Your actualizing helps our Big Friendly Planet in a benevolent empathic and congruent universe that showers unconditional love to all living things every single moment, for instance even when I'm watching *Strictly* on the telly consciousness rises and become shinier every minute.

11 September 2005

All this actualizing of potential could turn out to be pretty boring with no one going to the pub because being so soft and empathic and actualized they couldn't survive in there like Ronnie Laing said of Chief Carl who to be honest at first looks kind of weedy to me in those videos but he means what he says I give you that and this Gloria girl liked him in the end the way one likes a caring Dad, which is not at all like a Sugar Daddy, oh no, that's another ballgame altogether, right? No sugar here, only generous helping of saccharine and what's wrong with that I ask, especially if you are confused and battered by life, what's wrong if someone listens to you and nods and makes friendly humming sounds and repeat the words you just said so that you really know that she or he is listening to you; and how rare is that in the world we live in? Even your two-bit friends, let's face it, they give you advice and what do they know? The GP gives you prescriptions, and your band mates give you drugs, so it is rare and precious to have a nice geezer or woman nodding and listening and rephrasing and paraphrasing and humming away so that you begin to know and understand, get it?

13 September 2005

It's good to see once a week someone who prizes you and accept you as you are, even though you haven't got a clue what or who you are in the world or even if he also doesn't have a clue in the world but is so kind and nice and perceptive that somehow you begin to like yourself a bit more and then start making good decisions instead of crap ones like *I* did so many times.

Here I am, at 42, re-training as they say, *me a therapist?* 'A shrink?' my ex band mate asked me in disbelief. That's when it dawned on me. When I signed up I thought, well, it's another step towards self-discovery or whatever.

[...]

Re actualization: I just remembered ed that during the lunch break at our introductory course someone pointed at a group of people coming out of the room opposite ours. 'They are third year – she said – they must be self-actualized, or at least *more* actualized than us. Look how they walk, how they talk and smile at each other; they look so ... present'. I nodded, unconvinced. What am I getting into? Well, it started quite naturally anyway. Started therapy two years ago, as I wanted to get myself sorted. Don't we all?

14 June 2006

This afternoon during fish bowl exercise, rather than writing down feedback to Carole who was being therapist to John who was being client, I just wrote down ~~what~~ whatever came up, feeling the room out, the general feel of it, drifting in and out of what John was saying and Carole was saying and this is what came up. It was fun to do and did I learn something? I did in fact but couldn't really put it in an essay or speaking it at a Viva or anything like that and by the way it's not poetry either I don't think nor could I give it as a feedback but I think it's related to what Carole was saying and to what John was saying, so here it goes:

Work-like, brittle. Connection, as when something fits in a painting. Enclosure, the ground under my feet, something wanting to go down. Low voices. Silence. Testing the walls: how

solid? How safe? Hemmed in. Warmth. Distant sounds drifting. Can everything be allowed? World waiting to be called in. Filled suspension. Do come in, into a false oasis of cries and whispers and drafts settling down, lapping the floor. The secret can't be known. Nope – it doesn't want to be known. Traffic on a busy street. We can't stop. Not allowed to. Come closer, closer and cry as much as you like and talk and play, kindergarten play, yes play over the top. Here by the river, still water, muffled sound. These words rising, suspended and fading, passing away absorbed by the carpet. Craving so badly, held tenderly on the red carpet, change and face the strange. The room says 'change will happen anyway, the room says it.

The Name of the Father

25 June 2006

My first residential week end: on arrival, I saw the three tutors having dinner in the corner of the cafeteria and ask Caroline, my tutor, 'What's the plan?' She gives me a broad smile and in response to my question opens her arms wide. I was perplexed and a bit embarrassed. Maybe it was her way of saying 'Let me have my dinner in peace'. Don't know. Was I wrong in asking? I'm paying to attend this weekend after all and I'd rather not be here but away with my new girlfriend as it's been awhile since we had 'quality' time together. But anyway, I talked about this with Joanna, who has done another course before and knows this sort of thing. Her take is that Caroline probably meant that it is all open, it is an *encounter*, a giant two and a half day group process where we can be ourselves and there is no leader and there is no plan. Hence the wide open arms, meaning acceptance and love and unconditional regard big time and with a large group. But does this mean that *anything* goes? With a group of *forty* people? Never mind. I'm all cosy in bed with a short story by James Salter, and soon I'll switch off the light and tomorrow is another day.

27 June 2006

On the train back to London, I'm reminded of what the only male tutor said this morning in the large group. He mentioned Kafka's letter to his father where he accused him of being too permissive, too accepting: 'Go out my son, do whatever you like!' And what is more disabling, more castrating than that? The tutor seemed to imply that assuming that we can sit around in an 'open' encounter' is a misleading notion, that maybe the injunctions are internalized, what other psychologists call, I think, the Name of the Father: necessary, to exercise our claws, our sense of limitations and boundaries, and a lot more useful than this naive humanistic stuff of the 'we're all free'. That's what I understood anyway. And in any case is not like we were free at all. It seemed clear to me that Caroline was running the show. I mean, she was condescending towards the male tutor whose name is Rudy, for each time Rudy spoke she would either correct him or thank him for his contribution which is not the sort of thing you say to a co-facilitator I don't think but more to a student, no?

Infernal Locus of Evaluation

6 July 2007 12.20pm

En route to the person-centred Conference with the ghost of a faint summer bleeding on this green and pleasant land, I breathe with relief. Fields and trees, mute in their green and pleasant disregard of all things human, save for our comical despair that makes us go in search of a shrink, i.e. someone like me.

Then the Virgin train-of-never-ending-broadcasts leaves me stranded in some backwater with not a soul in sight but a Scandinavian lady, Agnek. Both of us amble religiously around our suitcases in front of a semi deserted pub. It turns out Agnek loves London and so do I. But what are we doing here in the sticks? Over apple juice (me) and beer (her) we convince a punter to take us to the Conference – "we are psychologists, you know" using concerted

beaming of UPR and the promise of a large tip. I end up giving too much money out of clumsiness, out of this fucked-up idea of being the Buddhist champion of the unemployed.

So this is the famous Conference: sunset on green fields; boys shouting, playing football while I talk on the phone to my sweetheart left behind in North London where civilization still reigns on the other side of the Watford Junction.

7 July 2007 11.40 a.m.

Today I learned that Carl Rogers was human and not a 24/7 super hero of empathy. What a relief! He wrestled with demons in the small hours! He drank (not just apple juice)! He had *affairs*! He also wanted to make sure that no Rogerian Church would see the light of day in the US, something he could not manage on these shores obviously. Fat chance buddy, for here in Europe there is great, inferiority-induced clamour and incitement for the PCA to become professional, with some person-centred celebrities berating the sceptics and inciting the faithful to grow and multiply, to metamorphose from a small commando of well-meaning and awfully-nice people to sharp suit-wearing non-expert doctors who will enter the walls of the city where, however, from Plato onwards no gypsy, refugee and spiritual anarchist has ever entered.

7 July 2006. 11pm

Community meetings are the thing here. They remind me of my student movement days – the worthy aspirations, the populism: despotism of the majority, chatterbox consensus ... All together now, but is this another middle-class confraternity? I bet most therapists here own their home or at least have a mortgage. As I tucked in the third meal of the day, I gaze in wonder at the dignified interiors of the dining hall: the revolution will have to wait ‘til after dinner.

[...]

This morning I was challenged by someone called Marianne. Mind you, she didn't address me directly but asked Agnek whether she had minded being 'taken over' by me. Backtrack: last night someone at community meeting Agnek started speaking while *I* was speaking. I carried on talking rather than being a gentleman and let the lady speak first. So this morning this Marianne asks *her* whether she felt 'shut down by that other person, that *man*'. I felt stunned. For a good five minutes I sat there with mixed feelings, mainly anger. I hesitated. Someone else talked. Then I asked for the mic and said how really pissed off I felt. Who was she? A public prosecutor? And why was she not addressing me directly? She responded while pacing up and down the room, in a way that reminded me of my brief stint with physical theatre. Someone interrupted me, 'can't ~~you~~ see she is upset?' I ~~have~~had an urge to stand with my feet on the chair and strike a dramatic pose to show that I too was upset, big time. The debate raged on, others got involved. I glanced at Marianne – she was sitting on the far left across the line of chairs – I could see her tears. I felt an unexpected ~~a~~ surge of tenderness and a desire to speak and cry with her but didn't do any of that, I just couldn't. As the meeting ended, I was surprised that some people – mostly women – expressed their support to me. It also felt strange that no ~~ma~~en, for what I recall, spoke at the time. Marianne had framed her intervention around the issue of gender, but where were the men? I am fairly new to PC World. What do men do in here? Try to be good and soft and considerate? Beats me. Maybe they are shitting themselves and distract others' attention from the fact by quoting Rogers and Clouds of Unknowing.

PS I just read the line above and feel embarrassed. Am I a cynic? Must erase it from the final version.

UPR for all

15 December 2007

I'm confused. A guy from the third year made a joke at the general meeting of tutors and trainees, saying how dismayed he was that London had a toff as a major and this posh tutor objected to his 'racism'. I thought racism means calling a black person a nigger, or referring to Jews as mean and more generally to say nasty things about any historically oppressed group. But most of the group agreed. They said person-centred is about acceptance and you can't call a toff a toff. It's discriminatory. I'd thought all along that PCT came out of, you know, the anti-Vietnam war, May '68, humanistic psychology, being on the side of the underdog, fostering progressive change, being freedom-loving and radical and rebellious and (kindly) sticking two fingers up all the privileged, domineering, patronizing classes whose behaviour exacerbated mental distress etc. But no. Turns out PCT is a sort of liberal, centrist, tolerant view where we all get along with one another. Reminds me of New Labour. Not in the least incompatible with smiley, recycling, tolerant, *nice* conservatism and even why not, right-wingers and monarchists – provided you are, you know, really nice and meaning it.

24 January 2008

What can I say? I read Jean Genet to keep sane. I read Genet in the way Genet read Proust – to understand how to write, which is a lot more than a skill, methinks. My own writing has been contaminated by too much psychology and academic garbage. OK, it has helped me to convey thoughts in a certain way; it has helped me publish some academic papers here and there and even the odd article in *Therapist Monthly*. So? I just can't betray my love of poetry and philosophy and all for what? To have my articles dissected by anonymous grumpy reviewers. To have them desiccated and anesthetized? Get me out of here!

2 February 2008

I get it: Macondo is a family. Is this why I can't *breathe*?

24 January 2008

Clients come and go and forget to close the door.

15 April 2008

Yesterday I met Giorgio. We had lunch together. He had soup and tea – left the tea bag brewing forever in the milky paper cup. I had a sandwich and a coffee. I was glad he found time to meet, him so well-known and all that. His workshop organized by Macondo in a town hall a month ago or so came at the right time. I was about to give up the training but something in the way he presented the seminar made me think it's OK to have doubts, you don't have to be a card-carrying member of a cult in order to be a therapist. Anyway, he said how tired he is of working in an institution where courses are organized for what exactly other than making money? We both laughed, but I know that he practically *is* the institution, while I'm just a little schmuck, really. Is that the freedom of those who are past expertise, who mastered their metier and can afford a carefree ride?

The florist near where he lives got it into his head that he is an old hobo and greets him with a touch of condescension, 'How's things today?' 'Have just come back from a conference in Sweden'. 'Oh, really? (incredulous) I'm sure you have, I'm sure you have!' Giorgio's work has that touch of creativity that restores therapy to the arts. Psychotherapy needs strong poets to inject life into the stale recycling of knowledge in academia where to succeed means to conform. Are therapists aspiring to be artists? I know many who don't but maybe a few are. Anyway, he wanted to get to know what I want to do with this all therapy thing.

17 April 2008

I have done well so far. I stayed at the blooming course and it's now Diploma final act. My therapist Tony is waffling and shuffling in his brown leather chair. A Byronic portrait of himself at 28 years of age on the wall. His little dog came in today and barked at the portrait. Did I bring ghosts back into this apartment? He waffles at times but he is so affable and considerate; he mentions TV programmes as examples. We had a good discussion on the DSM and why some person-centred writers are so damn obsequious to this shite and what I can do to balance, i.e. absorb, learn, feel the mounting rage against the stuff I'm being fed and then take a healthy distance.

Sheep of Tomorrow

5 May 2008

An international figure came to give a one-day seminar at Macondo day before yesterday. It was a big deal and they put posters up months before and book signing and webinars and what not and it was all about how the PCA according to Chief Carl wasn't just about clinical work, no, it's all about Thinking Big, Changing the World, Building the Future, Creating the Persons of Tomorrow. The name of the big shot is Eileen and she studied with the Chief in Person and she said it was a super dynamic whirl of transformative energy and really deep stuff that was going on and some of my course mates had said if you are receptive it will rub off you this good positive stuff, and you may come out of the day actualized just like that or at least with some insight that in due course will grow massive. Eileen also talked Big Love and reminded me of Marianne who had said the same thing which btw comes from the Christian Bible I think. Were we not supposed to be free of all this religious stuff and walk around with less baggage? My real fear is that the PCA is basically smuggling back blooming Christianity after we worked so very hard all those years to push it back and leave us alone and let us live our sweet and sorrowful lives, our short life on this poor crust of a planet but no. Eileen went on, it was about *agape*, big love with no strings attached whatsoever, because

love is great and love will win. We shouldn't be afraid to love our clients, to be of great service, we, the big-love therapists, Eileen was saying; we shall usher in a new world of collaboration and open dialogue. This is because we are all interconnected, we are one, you and me and he and she; and human suffering can be defeated at the dawn of this new era that will see the birth of the persons of tomorrow. They will be fully therapized; they will dream in colour, the persons of tomorrow never ever will they dream in black and white. Mental distress can be defeated right now if all of us hold hands congruently and empathically. But there is work ahead of us, a tremendous amount of work to do, she added. I looked around at the packed room in Macondo full of counsellors to be all taking notes and breathing deeply. Anxiety is not necessarily part of existence, she added. It is created by social circumstances. But there is no need to bring about a revolution. This is *not* an anti-institutional battle. We still can work in the same old institutions and bring change from within, Eileen said, and as she said that I noticed the group of tutors in the right corner giving big sighs of relief. This is an *inner* revolution, you know. Like, we can still churn out the same old course notes and show the same old *PowerPoint* presentations and quote from the very same old books. Just add some new jargon from neuroscience, a bit from attachment theory and find a good healthy link between PCT and CBT. And make sure trainees repeat all the stuff in their essays and most importantly at their VIVA examination. They shall usher in the future. They shall see the Birth of the Sheep of Tomorrow.

One hundred plus years of solitude

3 April 2009

Can't believe I'm still dreaming of Macondo a year after I graduated. It hangs around like a dysfunctional family home, like a small town you dig your way out of with your nails.

In the dream Mark and I were walking around; we had both dropped acid and some big event had just finished and it was night and we were looking and looking the whole night for the exit, like, how do we get out of this effing place? I mean, it's nice and all, but can we please get out now, please? Only around 7am or so we finally found the front door and out there it was a magical winter morning with fluffy snowflakes and there was a guy straight out of a Mantegna painting selling red apples, it was a fruit market in Milan and I bought one and my god it was delicious. We were out of the blooming Garden of Eden at last, and the forbidden apple was the best thing, for who wants to live in a bloody empathic prison and been showered with Love, and giving birth to the Persons of Tomorrow? And when I woke-~~UP~~up I thought, yeah makes total sense, in Garcia Marquez's novel too (Garcia Marquez, 2014) Macondo is an insular place cut off from the world. Was it not a Biblical injunction to marry within the tribe and worship the One and Only Righteous God? My God, they have a name for people like that, it's hey, *endogamous!* And in Macondo too, you see, we were not allowed to find a therapist or supervisor outside the Macondo-approved list of therapists and supervisors so that the whole incestuous, controlling and auditing to-and-fro could continue 'til the sheep come home and we could then churn them out the Sheep of Tomorrow, the Empathic Agents of Conformity and Banality that will make sure that the same blooming nonsense is repeated for a few more generations.

I bit the apple, mmh yes it was delicious and thank god I'm free at last.

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