

THE THERAPIST AS IDIOT

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Published in the *Hermeneutic Circular*, Society of Existential Analysis April 2016 pp 10-11

What we do have words for is already dead in our heart.

-- Nietzsche

The Poetry of the Idiotic Stance

My late father loved language and would sometimes add an etymological footnote to his reproaches. 'You are behaving like an idiot!' would be followed by an informal lecture on the etymology of the word. 'An *idiot* – he'd say – is one who has his own *idiom*. What is wrong with that, you may ask. Well, no one else will understand what you are talking about. And that may be a bit of a problem.'

I was reminded of this when reading, in Darren Langdridge's review of Ernesto Spinelli's 2nd edition of *Practising Existential Therapy* (in *Existential Analysis*, January 2016, p. 226), of a comment on the descriptive stance advocated in the book and portrayed by its author as *the therapist as idiot*. For Langdridge, 'this is a rather unfortunate phrase but we can see the focus here is on assuming a phenomenological attitude first and foremost as the relationship is developed.'

Neatly integrated in this rather breezy assessment are the two usual responses to the 'therapist as idiot' stance: a) clunky, humourless and literalist ('a rather unfortunate phrase'); b) appraisal of the strategic value of this stance (the therapist is not *really* an idiot but shows great sophistication in approaching clients with her incredibly subtle tactics).

I am familiar with these responses; they are the ones I hear every time when, working with groups, I solemnly advocate the idiotic stance. I suspect my

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own version differs somewhat from Spinelli's. I confess to be sympathetic to his perspective even though in all honesty I cannot claim, as Professor Langdridge appears to do, to understand it fully.

My own source, long before becoming acquainted with Spinellian musings, comes from the ancient venerable tradition of idiotic wisdom known as *Ch'an* in China and *Zen* in Japan. Becoming a fully-fledged idiot is the very essence of Zen training. At times 'idiocy' is described as blindness, and the trainee is encouraged to travel all five degrees of idiocy or blindness:

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.

(Manu Bazzano, in 'Planting an Oak in a Flower Pot', in *The Wisdom of Not-Knowing*, 2016, p 90)

If I read him correctly, encouragement to pursue advanced idiocy also comes from Merleau-Ponty. In his unfinished, posthumously published *The Prose of the World*, he speaks of the subject (the person, the individual, etc.) as being herself a *new idiom* who in turn invents new modes of expression. Language itself is opened up to new singular forms that are unique to a particular human experience.

This process is at first unavoidably subjective, and inescapably 'narcissistic'; it stutters as it struggles to articulate its own idiom – creating a language rather than applying the given one – what some cognitive scientists such as Francisco Varela would refer to as 'first-person report', and obliquely close to what Ted Hughes partly referred to as 'poetry':

The real mystery is this strange need. Why can't we just hide it and shut up? Why do we have to blab? Why do human beings need to confess? Maybe if you don't have that secret confession, you don't have a poem – don't even have a story, don't have a writer.

(*The Paris Review Interviews*, Vol. 3, 2008).

The therapist tunes into the idiotic/poetic (incarnate) language of the client and then offers his own idiotic responses – idiotic because they are *not interpretations* but further *associations*, elaboration of a singular idiom. This idiotic exchange may be also described, in Merleau-Ponty's words, as taking **the** risk of communication, the very heart of genuine encounter, our real chance to pursue 'truth' via engaged conversation rather than the unveiling of a supposedly pre-existing 'Truth'. This is the very heart of rationality, broadly understood:

[We] are rational not because what [we] say and do has a transcendent guarantee, but simply because ... [we] can still, if [we] make an effort, communicate with and understand one another.

(Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 1981, p. 299).

Notes on Stupidity

And then there is stupidity. I remember a poignant remark made by the great, late novelist William Gaddis:

I constantly try to call attention to what my mother had told me once at some paranoid moment of mine: You must always remember that there is much more stupidity than there is malice in the world
(*The Paris Review Interviews*, Vol. 2, 2007)

What is stupidity in this context? It is the attempt to translate the essentially unfathomable human experience (some may call it 'existential unconscious') into measurable, quantifiable data, which is one of the elements of the current zombiefication of experience and obliteration of the humanities operated by neo-liberalism and neo-positivism.

Instead of an opening of language that makes room for and tries to express experience (which is how language is renewed), the meaning of experience is *made to fit* (*incastrato* in Italian) within the clunky iron grip of data.

This is eminently boring – as any editor or reader of academic psychology journal will tell you – and profoundly uninspiring. It also fails to foster the research and the advancement of understanding it is supposed to promote. It is a disservice to the subjective experience of the client and, equally important, to the therapist's presence and interventions – what some cognitive scientists like Varela would refer to as third person description.

I don't know how far Spinelli takes his idiotic stance. His idiocy may well be strategic, much like 'non-directivity' with some person-centred practitioners who choose to not to take literally the essentially ethical demand implicit in the principle on non-directivity.

Personally, I aspire to maintain the stance in all 'phases' of therapy, continually searching for new idioms that may help rewrite the very meaning of therapy. I claim the right to be an idiot all the way. My father would be proud.