

Escape from the therapy trap

Part two of a personal history of the Lifeline Project in Manchester



“FOR THE MAJORITY of our customers, their problems were those of homelessness, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, loneliness. But we wanted to see more. We wanted to dig down to the personal growth bedrock. Thinking back, it seems as if it had never occurred to us that it can be hard to ‘grow’ when you can’t read and write and you don’t know where you’re going to sleep that night. We didn’t ignore these material issues, but our therapeutic disease belittled and mocked them.

Some, perhaps many, of our customers could have benefited from therapeutic approaches in a safe environment. Our great folly was in believing that we had created one. Many had been sexually or physically abused. Little Billy had been regularly beaten by his alcoholic father. Sheila had been locked in a cupboard for three days for ‘stealing’ bread from the kitchen table. Maggie, born in a tenement in Dundee, was repeatedly sexually abused by an ‘uncle’ in front of her mother.

Backgrounds of this kind were not uncommon, and drugs provided a way of dulling the pain. Therapy may have helped, but the overriding need for the Little Billys, the Sheilas and the Maggies was to find a place of safety; to escape from the crushing round of prison, homelessness and despair. Personal restructuring could wait.

In the end, it was the dramatic escalation in drug use at the end of the seventies which tore us out of the therapy trap. The standard theory now is that as drug use grew at the end of the seventies it began to encompass young people whose lives were, otherwise, quite normal. The new drug users were ordinary working class youths whose unemployment, criminal activity, anti-social behaviour was a result of (rather than a precursor to) their drug use. That’s the theory.

But we have no real facts to base this theory on. We argue that drug users of the ‘80s had much more in common with their non-drug using counterparts. Yet we know very little about the relationship between early ‘70s drug users and *their* counterparts.

Are the drug users of the eighties *really* any less emotionally scarred than their counterparts in the sixties and seventies? Any less anti-social? Criminal? Any less unemployed? All we know is that the number of known drug users got bigger. Much bigger.

Whatever the validity of the theory, it succeeded in changing the face of drug services for ever. For

me, the change was devastating. I had spent the past ten years learning therapeutic techniques. Introducing myself to cushions. Breaking up into small groups to share my experience. Hugging other social workers. And nurses. And drama teachers. And youth workers. Thanking them for sharing with me. Sharing with them (though only a little). Talking to chairs.

Suddenly, inexplicably, the world had been turned upside down. Much of what I had believed in had already slipped away. It wasn’t like waking up. It was much more like falling down. Slowly. Ask any former believer in Transcendental Meditation at what point they came to believe that yogic flying was merely bouncing up and down. They can’t tell you. It was so gradual. Sometimes the ground you stand upon, or

believe you stand upon, becomes worn away.

Other realities grow up through it. Like trees.

Until there are so many trees that you can’t see the horizon any more. You just have to turn around and look in another direction if you want to see the sky, to register the horizon. It was a lot like that. Slow, imperceptible at first. And then, all in a rush, so that there didn’t seem any other direction your thoughts could lead you.

And yet this dramatic change was in some ways – for me at least – almost reassuring. It represented a return to the simple, the pragmatic, the practical. Once again I was to become the organisation’s handyman.

Throughout those early months I had talked to the customers: between jobs, sometimes during them, during coffee breaks. I had been stunned to hear that the management committee had been assured that my counselling skills were “exceptional”. I hadn’t really been sure what counselling actually was.

Now, after a decade of striving to understand the complexities of counselling and the higher arts of therapy, I was returning to the notion that just talking to people – letting them talk, offering advice and practical help – was not in the least mundane. No. It was what we should all have been striving for in the first place. Oh! delicious irony.

It was not that our therapeutic endeavours were wrong. It is

quite clear that many drug users really are emotionally scarred. That therapeutic techniques, applied judiciously and eclectically, can provide a powerful remedy. What was wrong was the assumption that all drug users were like this during the seventies. Also wrong was the assumption that, after 1980, all drug users were not.

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by

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