

COUPLES THERAPY TRAINING, CLINICAL PAPER

MARK BRAYNE

JUNE 2010

1562 words

“I’m sorry I didn’t have time to write a short essay,” said the student to his teacher. “So here’s a long one instead.”

Five-to-fifteen hundred words to summarise couples therapy and its transpersonal dimensions is something of a challenge. But if it’s possible to explain the history of the Chinese Communist Party in 60 seconds for Radio 4, perhaps it’s feasible to explore the essence of relationships on a couple of sides of A4.

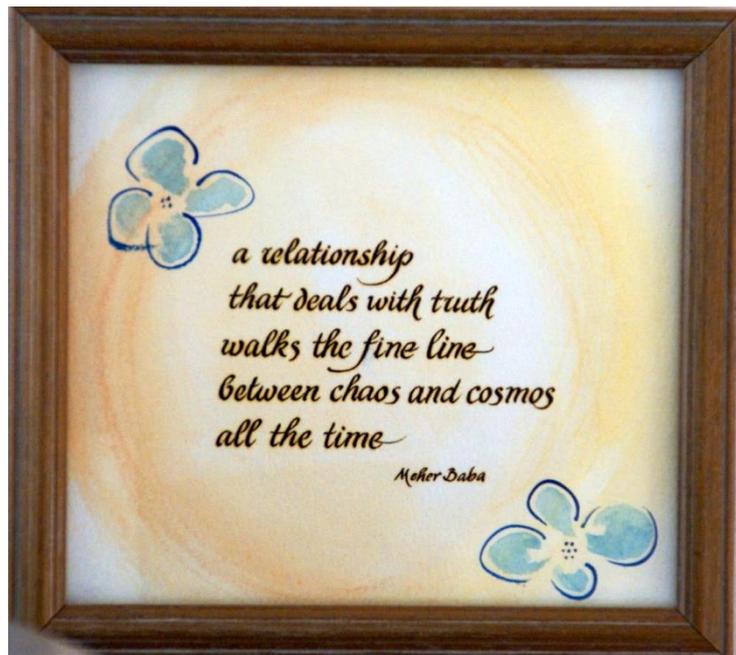
Beginning with the observation of a fortune cookie that...



I know that someone quite substantial (Jung, perhaps?!) first coined the thought, but I have been able to trace it so far only to the American comedienne Rita Rudner. Never mind, since like most clichés it is profoundly true.

Relationships, like life itself (thinking here of Scott Peck’s brisk opening paragraph to the *Road Less Travelled*), aren’t meant to be easy.

Another wise and equally clichéd saying with uncertain provenance (I have not been able to confirm the attribution to the Indian mystic Meher Baba) is the following, hanging on our bedroom wall at home...



(A relationship that deals with Truth walks always the fine line between Chaos and Cosmos.)

Drawing on the same simple collective wisdom, John Welwood says something very similar in *Journey of the Heart*:

Intimate relationships force us to face all the core issues of human existence – our family history; our personality dynamics; questions about who we are, how to communicate, how to handle our feelings, how to let love flow through us, how to be committed, how to let go and surrender... If relationships are difficult, it is because being human is difficult. The question of how to be in a relationship is no other than the question of how to live.

With individuals (where, after all, most of our therapeutic work is fundamentally about relationships, whether the Other is in the room or not) as with couples, these are simple truths which I like to bring into the shared space very early in the therapy.

From my own experience, that of my clients and from my reading, I believe that couples in trouble, adrift in their personal and shared distress, need active support and engagement, and structured and safe container/boundaries within which the relationship can heal.

Indeed, in the limited couples work I have done so far, exercises such as the Unconscious Fit and Genograms have been at times astonishingly powerful, especially with clients who have so far done little individual therapeutic exploration.

I know this might be seen as an inappropriately emotional and personally-coloured response, but I see red when I hear it argued that couple therapy should, as a matter of principle, have “no structure imposed on it...” (cf. Scharff and Scharff), but focus rather on resistance, counter-transference and the relationship with a therapist, who sits non-directively listening, taking no formal history and bringing nothing about him/herself into the room.

Leaving couples spinning in the wind for months and sometimes years, without explicitly helping them with appropriate psycho-education and structured exercises to understand and work through

the dynamics of their relationship is, in my experience and view, at times little short of abusive – financially as well as emotionally.

Relationships matter. An intimate partnership is a crucible (or alchemical vessel) for growth, connection and a repairing of wounded attachments. Once clients can release their fantasies about what love should be, and embrace the inevitable and necessary conflict as two souls collide, a relationship can be the ultimate personal development workshop.

It is a Third Entity, a co-created space both between and enfolding two individuals drawn together, as Harville Hendrix persuasively puts it, by their Imago wounding, instinctively reaching for completion, individuation and integration.

Although I don't necessarily articulate this to the clients, I know that I embark on pairwork with a very specific personal hope.

Most couples coming into therapy did after all, usually, in that once-upon-a-time space, commit to staying together for the rest of their lives. If possible, I aim to support them in finding ways of being able to do that. At the same time, as I know from my own complex journey since meeting my first wife nearly 40 years ago, healing takes different forms and journeys, sometimes needing to choose the Road More Travelled (since staying together is much harder work) of separation.

The goal of therapeutic work is, then, to help clear the obstacles to the innate, unconscious, evolutionary capacity of both the relationship itself and of the individuals invested in it to heal, although rarely in the way the client originally thought it might.

It's in this context that I also like to help my clients understand how relationships – and life – unfold, ricocheting on the one hand between Chaos and Cosmos, but also following a recognisable progression through phases of growth defined by Tuckman as *Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing*, or by Scott Peck (my favourite) as *Pseudo-Community, Chaos, Emptiness and Community*. One might also add the stages of Romance, Power Struggle and Maturation, or Dependence, Independence, Inter-Dependence – the list of metaphors is long.

I am also increasingly aware of what one might call the neurophysiological archetypes of relationship, and of how romantic love in its early phases, before it settles into companionship or chronic conflict, activates both the brain's deepest survival instincts and its access to the Collective Unconscious.

As Welwood argues, with Darwin, evolution requires us to be attracted to partners with the genes most likely to help ensure the survival of the species. The curvaceousness of the female form and the glossiness of the lips might signal for example an abundance of fertility-boosting oestrogen. And the jutting manly jaw and pert bottom signal, perhaps and so I'm told, the capacity to defend and feed the offspring of the sexual union which evolution intends will follow the ego-boundary-collapse of physical attraction.

The symptoms of what is felt as overwhelming love are, when you think of it, very similar to those for trauma, echoing Criteria B, C and D of PTSD as defined in DSM-IV: Intrusive Thoughts and Feelings, Hyperarousal (experienced for example as digestive shutdown or an inability to concentrate on anything other than the beloved object), and, of course, if the love is not requited, Avoidance and Numbing. (Remember reaching out to turn off the radio when they began playing your and your departed lover's favourite song?)

If this signals how love and sexual attraction activate the oldest, reptilian parts of the brain – the amygdala and the brain stem itself - the delight of working with couples and with relationships is how this labour also engages the highest and most noble dimensions of what it means to be human.

The archetypal pull of opposite-sex *Animus* or *Anima* attraction is as replete with spiritual meaning as it can be with physical lust, whether – paradoxically perhaps - in heterosexual or same-sex relationships. Which is why fairy tales of Prince-Rescues-Damsel-in-Distress or Cinderella-Finds-Her-Prince-Charming still have such a powerful narrative pull on supposedly rational contemporary societies.

More than 60 seconds up, yet there is so much more one could say.

I could write about Yin and Yang. I could (and will, in other contexts) explore the challenge to older couples of maintaining intimacy when the Post-Menopausal female is no longer interested in, or physically able to commit to, a continuing sexual relationship. For all my loathing of classic psychodynamic couples therapy, it would be good to write more about object relations, and how we do end up marrying our mother or our father.

Especially relevant would be a(nother) book or three of observations about attachment – and how avoidant, ambivalent or disorganised attachment patterns get acted out in relationship and in therapy, aware (and what a comment this is on the ability and longing of the human psyche to heal) how the secure attachment of just one partner is usually enough to do the work of attachment for both, without recourse to therapy.

But there is not enough space. Suffice it in conclusion to say that it is rewarding, terrifying and fun to work with couples. This is struggle at the sharp edge of human consciousness. And if humanity is - in all of this term's meanings - to *survive* the coming civilisational collapse of resource depletion and global heating, then it will be in our capacity to relate, well and honestly and healthily, in pairs as in groups as in communities and as across borders, that the work will be done.

Bibliography

- BOBES, T. & ROTHMAN, B. (2002). *Doing Couple Therapy*. New York. Norton.
- GERHARDT, S. (2004). *Why Love Matters*. London. Routledge.
- GOLEMAN, D. (1996). *Emotional Intelligence*. London. Bloomsbury.
- GRAY, J. (1992). *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. London. Thorsons.
- HENDRIX, H. (2005). *Getting the Love you Want*. London. Pocket Books.
- JUNG, C.G. (1978). *Man and his Symbols*. London. Picador.
- JUNG, C.G. (1989). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York, Vintage.
- LITVINOFF, S. (1993). *The Relate Guide to Sex in Loving Relationships*. London. Vermilion.
- PECK, M.SCOTT. (1990). *The Road Less Travelled*. London. Arrow.
- PECK, M.SCOTT. (1990). *The Different Drum*. London. Arrow.
- ROGERS, C. (1961). *On Becoming a Person*. London. Constable.
- SCHARFF, J. & SCHARFF, D. (2008). OBJECT RELATIONS COUPLE THERAPY. In *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*. New York. Guildford.
- WALLIN, D. *Attachment in Psychotherapy*. New York. Guildford.
- WELWOOD, J. (1991). *Journey of the Heart*. New York. Harper Perennial.