



Sacred space: different boundaries

Caroline Brazier
reflects on the benefits
and challenges of
working therapeutically
in outdoor spaces
with environmentally
based therapies

I was talking to my cousin, a psychodynamic art therapist, the other day at a family gathering: 'But what about boundaries?' she asked incredulously as I began to enthusiastically describe my recent experience of running an ecotherapy training intensive in a hillside wood in Wales.

Stopped in my tracks, I reflected for a minute on how to reply. In my everyday role as a therapist in private practice I totally agree with her about the need for a clean, ordered, bounded therapy space; but in the through-the-wardrobe world of ecotherapy, I happily sit amongst the trees, watching the morning's porridge boiling in the saucepan on the campfire with a group of people joined by a sense that nature is therapeutic, and feeling no contradiction in our mixed roles as leaders, students, therapists and participants.



How does an outdoor space, without clear, controllable limits, provide a safe environment for therapeutic work? It is not so much that there are no boundaries in this outdoor therapeutic space, but rather that the boundaries are different, to be held and explored in their diversity and to be used in different ways, according to the situation. Having spoken with others who work therapeutically in the natural environment, the question of appropriate boundaries is the grit on which the therapeutic pearl is formed. Similarly, in Buddhism there is a practice of working with koans, insoluble conundrums

which the practitioner muses on over days, months or even years, using them as a catalyst to spiritual transformation.

The question of how to hold a contained space in which to work, when the normal boundaries of the therapy room and the therapeutic hour are removed, is challenging, but also creative. Boundaries create containment. This can be broadly seen as having two functions: to provide therapeutic safety and to create intensity.

The Ten Directions training programme in environmental therapy¹ which we run at Tariki Trust is

based on the other-centred² therapeutic model. In the Ten Directions programme a number of principles have been identified as conducive to the therapeutic process, and these are presented as 10 elements (subsequently marked in bold in this article). Containment is particularly grounded in the therapeutic relationship itself, but it also comes from the relationship with the working space, albeit fluid and without defined limits.

The other-centred approach is based upon a triangular model of therapeutic relationship. Maintaining this triangular relationship is primary to the understanding of therapeutic boundaries in this field. The **therapeutic triangle** consists of the therapist, the client, and the client's world or, in much environmentally based work, the group therapist, the participant and the natural locality. Based on a triad rather than a dyad, in this model therapist and client predominantly function in a mode of co-operative enquiry. The therapist accompanies the client, psychologically occupying a position alongside him and reviewing his world collaboratively. In the natural environment, this side-by-side position is often literally adopted, as the group therapist explores the terrain alongside the other participants, functioning as fellow traveller, commentator, facilitator and sometimes leader.

Buddhism in its model of the self sees the inner world as intrinsically empty. At the same time, the outer world can be seen as full. In his recent article, *'Transcendence or Imminence? Balancing Heaven and Earth'³*, David Loy shows how Buddhist psychology, which challenges the idea of a fundamental separation of the self, supports a radical embracing of the other in the concept of interconnection. Standing in the holding space of the countryside, we can together glimpse the fullness of experience, whilst at the same time recognising the way that each of us has limited perception, conditioned as we are by our pasts and by our mental constructions. The enormity of experience impacts upon our presence, inviting us into relationship. This encounter touches us on all levels: the practical, the psychological and the spiritual. Its fullness of experience gives a different kind of holding. It creates a containment through the recognition it embodies, experientially showing us the safety net of the interconnectedness of life.

In this experiential relationship with the world we come alive to our senses. The mind and the emotions are conditioned by the sensory connections. The way that

we react, however, has in turn been conditioned by the past. The mind is a storehouse in which the shadows of experience remain, colouring the new with old familiar stories. At the same time, however, the world speaks to us afresh through the shadows of our expectations. This process is described in the principle of **object-related identity**, another of the elements in the Ten Directions model. In the sensory world of the forest or the beach, new sense connections are created that are both vibrant and lay foundations for a different relationship with the world in general. Here we explore both old and new associations as they dance across the screen of the landscapes in which we work.

Relationship creates containment. In this work the client is held by the therapist and the natural world, which form the two corners of the therapeutic triangle. Between these two, the therapeutic process is held. These two holding elements are reflected in the primary relational aspects of the Ten Directions model: **embodied contact** and **sacred space**. The therapist relates from a position of embodied presence, grounded and connecting with the client's process at the level of the felt sense as well as the cognitive. (S)he also brings to the relationship her awareness of the spatial quality of the environment in which they are working.

The concept of sacred space has implications both in terms of the choice of particular working environments and the attitude of mind which is applied to all the spaces in which the work is done. Firstly, in selecting working spaces, the therapist looks for locations which have a natural containing quality. A group may meet in a woodland clearing, a sheltered cove, or a secluded meadow. The group may also create sacred spaces by simply forming a circle to talk, an ancient rite, common to so many traditions. Or it may deliberately create meeting spaces or shrines which reflect its individuality, intensifying gatherings and deepening the group process by using such traditional forms. Working with space in this way is itself an act of containment and intensification.

Having a capacity to work with sacred space requires an appreciative, empathic relationship to one's surroundings. This sensitive appreciation is the mode of connection which is described in the Buddhist teachings on mindfulness. I have described elsewhere⁴ how the intent of the core text on mindfulness, the *Satipatthana Sutta*, teaches the development of a particular kind of awareness which is present to the other; to that which is not self. This

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For illustration purposes only, posed by model

awareness, which is characterised as non-judgmental and centred in the present, honours the transience and conditional nature of life, recognising the spiritual truth inherent in ordinary phenomena. Whilst we may deliberately develop mindfulness in environmentally based work, this kind of attention will also arise naturally from the encounter with wild situations.

Working in the environment speaks both to the personal and to the universal. Through this work we become aware of the interconnection between our own processes as individuals and the broader human situation. This happens on a number of levels. The Buddhist model of psychotherapy explores the relationship between our perceived, conditioned experience and the existential reality of the world. On the one hand, the work facilitates **encounter** with the reality of others: plants, creatures, rocks, water and geological features. Such encounter both invites exploration and reveals the unknowable mystery of all things. On the other hand, the work reveals our **conditioned view**: personal biases and interpretations created by culture and history. Such investigations have a personal dimension, but also reflect the collective level, our heritage of **myth and ritual**. This is the cultural conserve from which we launch our innovative faculties, spontaneity and **creativity**.

These core elements make up the substance of the therapeutic journey, held in the container of the wild, but the true value of such work comes in the return to the world. Echoing the well-known Chinese pictorial series, the Ox Herding Pictures, it is the return to the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands which marks the resolution of the process. The therapeutic journey takes us into the wilds of mind and planet, but it returns to the mundane and the urban with new insight. The new openness arising from the process of engagement brings **vibrancy**. The insight brings a deepened sense of responsibility. Psychological wellbeing cannot be separated from ethics, and new consciousness informs a more caring approach to the environment. We are no longer divorced from the planet, but experience **embedded living**.

According to Buddhist psychology, our psychic structures are built on awareness of, and fear of our mortality and vulnerability to change. At some level, the avoidance of this knowledge underpins all mental disturbance. Of course,

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this comes in many manifestations, and the ultimate existential crisis may be deeply buried, but the energy of our fear of impermanence creates the rigidity and habits of perceptions and action which form boundaries within the psyche against clearly seeing things as they are. We cling to the familiar and when it changes, we deceive ourselves into thinking it continues. We create walls against the world.

In nature nothing is static and impermanence is everywhere. The raw experience of birth, growth, decay and death are unavoidably present in every moment. As we walk on the hills, we find the decomposing remains of a fox, plundered by crows and other carrion birds. In the forest the new ferns grow in the decaying wood of a fallen tree. Such encounters do not need interpretation, but plant seeds of faith in something new in the psyche. Our individual lifespans are only part of the process. A greater process is unfolding with a rightness which we can only wonder at. Such encounters take us to the ultimate boundary in which perhaps we glimpse the boundary-less space.

So, in environmental therapy work, boundaries can take many forms. In particular we can identify three levels: the fundamental therapeutic container, the investigative edge and the ineffable absolute.

At a simple level, the presence of the therapist holds the process of the individual or the group, anchoring it as it moves from place to place, rather as the mother monkey remains a point of refuge for the infant when the troop travels through the treetops. The choice of location creates parameters of security and material safety, and limits are set within which the psychological work can take place.

The exploration of different spaces of the outdoors generates challenge and creates a stage on which boundary issues can be explored. Ground rules for psychological and physical safety are negotiated. Commitment and responsibility are tested against real situations in which there may be no sense of a rescuer or a culprit. A hike across a windswept moor cannot be abandoned midway except in dire circumstances. It tests endurance and courage, but also offers great learning.

At a more complex level, however, the opening of the therapeutic space into the world expands boundaries of

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the encounter to encompass infinite possibilities. It brings to focus questions which more often remain buried in the psyche. This expansive experience places client and therapist in relationship with the mystery of life, not simply as an internal field of personal regression, but as an external and irreducible reality.

Working in nature does you good. Therapists and group workers are now recognising what most people intuitively sense, that being out of doors is in itself a healing activity, and that doing it enhances the therapeutic process as a consequence. The result is the growth of an ecotherapy movement, which is fast gaining momentum. Spanning the disciplines of psychotherapy and spiritual journeying, community work and outdoor leadership, approaches in this diverse field vary from the hands-on forestry work and wilderness challenges to intimate therapeutic encounters with wildness. Nature affects people directly and subliminally. At a simple level a walk in nature can afford a kind of dialogue between client and therapist which may, for some, go deeper in some respects and feel more natural than that held in the consulting room. For others the creative and healing potential of ritual and shamanic-inspired experiences entices practitioners into new experimental arenas.

Autumn 2013 will see the relaunch of the Ten Directions Training Programme in Environmental Therapy. This programme, led by myself, started in October 2011 and was originally run in central France. This experience is described in my book, *Acorns Among the Grass: Adventures in Ecotherapy*⁵. Now the course is relocated closer to home. It will consist of five core theory weekends, each based around two of the modalities, which make up the 10 dimensions of the model, held in Narborough, Leicestershire, and two longer intensives, integrating the concepts through group-based work in the beautiful woods of the Rheidol Valley, near Aberystwyth, Wales.

Learning to work therapeutically in the outdoor environment is experiential and multi-dimensional. Typically the sessions start with practical work, which takes place in all the unpredictability of the natural world, followed by reflective sessions to explore the link between theory and practice. Sometimes activities are designed to explore particular teaching points, but often they grow directly out of the group process itself, frequently exploring universal themes – the sense of home, of journey, of dark

spaces, which create a backdrop against which individual life stories can be written and reconfigured. Working out of doors, however, is always open to the unanticipated, and even when particular outcomes are intended, learning occurs at many levels. A heron flies across the sky, a sudden thunder storm soaks group members, a dog appears, escaped from its owner. Like life, the unexpected eventualities can be viewed as interruptions or greeted as opportunities. There is always personal learning to be found.

Ten Directions provides tools with which to address the complex work and a model for reflecting on the balance of the work. For more information, visit www.buddhistpsychology.info and select the section on eco-therapy training.

Biography

Caroline Brazier is leader of the Tariki Training Programme in Other-Centred Psychotherapy and author of six books and many articles on Buddhism and psychotherapy. For more details of Tariki programmes, please see www.buddhistpsychology.info



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