

“I consider embodied presence vital if we are to continue truly sharing as a human race”

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The only advice I have received from my brother has been ‘play the game’. I take that to mean say yes, when you don’t mean it, be agreeable if you’re not in a position of power or just don’t rock the boat. But I knew from an early age that such acquiescence wasn’t in me. To quote Norman Mailer, I didn’t want a ‘slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled’.¹

My people were Martin Luther King Jr, Bill Hicks, John Pilger, Banksy, Alex Gibney, Frederick Douglass, Frederick Exley, Anzia Yezierska, Arthur Miller, Wei Jingsheng, Gay Talese, Kate Chopin and many others. People who *really* observed and asked questions; mainly ‘why?’ in the face of injustice, pompousness and the pain caused by nonsensical rules and laws.

This sense of having been wronged often makes its way into counselling. It is the desire for understanding, answers, new pathways and the knowledge that as a client you are not the first person to find the world odd, unfair and unflinching in its stupidity, bias and cruelty. Being one to one with a stranger can act as a refuge that stabilises a client and gives them faith that the things they have seen, felt and been affected by are real, and not a sign they have become detached from the world.

Connecting again, whether you are neurodivergent, introverted, depressed, anxious, lost or disappointed, is an essential first step. Having someone to offload to provides validation and perspective – basic things those around you don’t always think to give, or worse still, respond to with balderdash like ‘it is what it is’.

Philosophers have looked at mankind in different ways. Schopenhauer saw ‘human existence not as grand tragedy but squalid farce, with men and women writhing in the grip of appetites that are both pointless and insatiable...’² This, at least, teaches us to make merry when we can, and avoid greed.

Descartes thought ‘humans were unique hybrids, in which rational minds volitionally moved brute matter, making them something quite different from parrots and apes’.³ Freud was said to be the ‘prose-poet of the heart’s desire to break... Someone who brilliantly exposes the state of the psyche when it is at its most minimal and besieged’.⁴

‘Besieged’ is a fascinating word which can illuminate our plight at times. We feel barricaded in, stuck, close to a position of surrender. We feel at the mercy of stronger

forces that do not have the sensitivity, consideration or discernment to understand our difficulties.

Do we ‘play the game’ so as not to stand out and appear difficult or awkward? Do we ‘play the game’ because it’s easier? Do we ‘play the game’ because it’s just the way the world is built and not everyone can have choices? It’s sad those questions even run through our minds. That we don’t enjoy every minute of every day. That we often feel weighed down by a lack of money, a faulty boiler, a broken relationship, a sense that the world is on a kamikaze path of faith in AI and plutocrats. How do we run from this or at least have a modicum of control? What can counselling provide that flouts the new norm, the rickety and revised status quo showcased by tech giants and surveillance states?

I find ‘it is what it is’ and other such expressions feeble because they accept contemptible new norms and templates in front of us. They assume that change is beyond us and that challenging wrongs is futile.

Schopenhauer made several good points and suggestions, and in many ways preceded Slavoj Žižek. The aesthetic and ascetic were uppermost in his mind – beauty (art, music, contemplation) and simplicity (manual labour) there to transcend the ugly elements of our consciousness, which, in the 21st century, has been imprinted and infiltrated by small, psychopathic men on the world stage with no care for human life or achievements.

Historical progress isn’t a steady line or incremental upward curve, Schopenhauer recognised. Our underlying reality is, instead, affected by chaotic will. Žižek took this one step further, by being ‘against progress’.⁵ In other words, if progress is defined by a parochial few with sneering, mocking and divisive attributes, it is time to firmly *stop* playing the game and co-operating.

Beauty and simplicity at least pull us away. They turn our minds into heavenly instruments and have us sink into wonder and *genuine* momentum. When engaging with clients in person, I consider this a form of private contemplation and I’m grateful they’re keen to sit opposite me rather than stare through a screen. I consider this embodied presence vital if we are to continue truly sharing as a human race.

Time to reclaim the soul of counselling. Time to show Gen Z and others why they’re often despondent: technology. Otherwise, we become digitised vessels no longer in tune with nature. ●

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