

The View from here

By Hayley Marshall

A Vital Protocol

For my second set of reflections I am walking in very early spring through the woods up to Solomon's Temple, a local landmark on a hill on the south side of town.

Something in the air has definitely changed.

My animal body is responding to the appearance of the sun in an intensely blue sky, and the concomitant rise in temperature. The warming of the air brings new smells, small birds click and chuck high above, and beneath my feet the sodden earth is sticky as it begins to dry out. I feel a quickening inside as I gradually absorb the increased vitality around me.

Yet, as I ascend the hill, I also catch some sense of wariness in the landscape. The trees themselves still seem to be asleep, as if on a slower sweep of time in relation to the animal life within. An exuberant dash into the beckoning year is not their style; and naturally, caution carries a cloak of protection against any late snap of winter. I begin to feel some hesitancy creeping into my step as I move through the woods.

Engaged with this measured debate, I am reminded of Daniel Stern's (2010) writing about 'forms of vitality', where he elegantly portrays how we relate to and make meaning of the world surrounding us through the cross-modal (multi-sensory) languages of movement. Here in the woods right now there is much to resonate with in that respect, and I ponder our connection with the other-than-human forms of life, and their layering into our minds and bodies.

Embodied reflective dialogue with the diverse relational web of the natural world is a potent dimension of nature based psychotherapy. The physical container for the therapy is now a vibrant, dynamic, and living process, brimming with vitality. Enter therapist and client attuning to the animate world in which they move, and a rich intelligence can be brought to the work. It seems that a sharpening of the senses and a subsequent enlivening of the body, promotes a stirring of the nonconscious aspects of our process – a vital connection to our implicit nonverbal ways of being in the world. Whilst this relates to the dynamic Adult ego state process I mentioned in my last column, I think that there is also potential for a meeting here with some of the more dissociated (unconscious) aspects of our psyche. A green vitalising of the body/mind offers a very direct access to these traumatised elements as they reveal themselves in an intensified form. Effectively, here we have a portal into the subsymbolic world of our protocol.

Back in the woods I catch a small shape in my peripheral vision. Pausing, I spy a wren perched on a nearby fallen tree. This drop of magic invokes a spontaneous, silent, rounded gasp, as I am entranced. Suddenly, from the undergrowth a large dog pounces. I jump; the tiny bird flits away, and the spell is snuffed out. I feel robbed. In an instant I am transported

to times when as small child I was captivated by an object, an animal or a daydream, only to have that moment snatched away by an abrupt intrusion from the adults in my life - my pace stolen from me in an unattuned grab.

Berne described 'primal protocols' evocatively as 'echoes of the original situation' (1972), and outlined them as forming 'the pattern for the plan' (1963). I understand protocol as unconscious experience reflecting traces and shadows of past encounters with self, others (human and non-human), and the physical environment. Providing the essence for the later formed script, these experiences are deeply held within the body/mind, and offer valuable information about the relational atmosphere of our earliest times. Returning to Stern's ideas; attunement, and resonance through the dynamics of vitality offers us an immediate connection with the protected landscapes of our protocol. Whilst evident in the therapy room in the relationship between therapist and client; both the client's and the therapist's 'somatic infrastructure' (Cornell 2003) can be unveiled with an increased sense of immediacy when also relating with a living 'third'.

Essentially then, in nature based therapy there is an activation, and an opportunity to work with, what Bucci calls the 'affective core' (2008) of a client's internal relational world, through a sensory, body process.

As I reach the Victorian folly (Solomon's Temple) on the top of the hill, I am still musing on the earlier incident and my lingering experience of 'feeling robbed'. Although somewhat perturbed, I feel that an important vital 'knowing' has been revealed, through my encounter in the woods. This aspect of me now feels alive and available for more symbolic reflection. For me, and in my work outdoors, this enriched exploration of protocol process forms a significant part of deeper, personal transformation.

References

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