CHAPTER 5

DIALOGUE IN ITS LARGER CONTEXT

Only Connect!

Key words and themes: what goes on between, attunement, confluence, impact, presence, emitting and receiving, intersubjective knowing, means of knowing, subjects and objects, agents of knowing, accompanying, interweaving of means of knowing and objects of knowledge, unconscious communication, polyphonic score, relating, relatedness and unrelatedness, making meaning-full music.

This takes my earlier paper Some notes on dialogue, included here as Chapter 4, as read. Dialogue in its larger context was first published by COSCA in Counselling in Scotland in Spring/Summer 2004.

What I am interested in is what goes on between client and counsellor in the series of encounters that constitute the counselling relationship, and what that means to clients and counsellors as persons, in their lives.

I am interested in how people experience each other, and what they then make of that. Dialogue is important – words across, words crossing and re-crossing – but it is only a part of it, however crucial. It is part of something larger which is not primarily verbal.

I am also interested in observable behavioural dimensions, but it’s more than that too. So it’s not just words across (dialogue), and it’s not just voluntary and involuntary movements and expressions (behaviour and body language), but something that is more comprehensive and includes all of these. I know this could sound like ‘the mysterious’ or ‘the numinous’ but I hold that everything is knowable, and can become clear. Unfortunately, in order to achieve clarity more quickly, our methods of knowing are often reductive to what can be easily observed, corroborated, measured and described. The trouble is that that approach tends to miss some of the key things that go on between counsellor and client.

So I don’t want to devalue either behaviours and words or measurement and description. I want to locate and use these in relation to wider and deeper non-verbal processes.

This larger thing that goes on is difficult to name. Here are some of the words that get used: encounter, meeting, presence, attunement, resonance, barometrical registration, impact, reaction, response, representation. I’m allowing these words to come out and be written down. It’s a whole thing. It fluctuates, flows changingly along like a river, except sometimes there are gaps, discontinuities (for example, passages of non-attunement) and these are also important.
The word confluence comes to mind. A confluence is the process of two rivers joining, their waters meeting, inter-impacting, mingling.

The fact that the menstrual cycles of women living together gradually ‘harmonise’, occur at the same time of the month, comes to mind.

The way a lot of women and some men often seem to intuit what another person is feeling/thinking/what’s going on for them, comes to mind.

I want now – having circled around ‘it’ – to focus on what I think ‘it’ is. It is the total impact that one person has on another person when they are together in a room, only a part of which occurs through the use of words.

It is this something which occurs. It is this something to which we turn our attention. We try to attune (a) to what is occurring in ourselves and (b) to what we are receiving from the presence of the other. But these processes do not happen in separate rooms of the soul. It is the same person who is experiencing self and attending to other. The two processes relate to each other in various ways. Let me ponder this. In the Middle Ages there was this idea: all things that are, are lights: sunt lumina. All things go themselves (Gerard Manley Hopkins). They give out their light. In the counselling meeting, the client goes herself. So does the counsellor. Each emits/transmits, all the time, the totality of herself. The counsellor tries to be in receiver mode, receiving as much as she can of the client’s transmission (which is her being, her emitting of herself). It impacts on and is received in the counsellor. Maybe there are three processes: first, I receive the transmission of the self of the client through all my receptors, the whole of my living conscious, preconscious and unconscious body; second, I continue my own process of being myself and attending to what is going on in me while the first process is occurring; third, the first process impacts on the second and makes it take certain directions. It ‘selects’ or plays certain notes in the second process, it colours the second process, impacting on its pace and rhythm, its content and quality. Some of this occurs outwith conscious awareness. And then there is a fourth process: how all this is perceived, sorted, named, linked up, reflected upon, analysed, and understood. It is only the fourth process that may vary from orientation to orientation. It is, in part, a process of naming and conceptualisation: what you think and say happened, and how you come to think about it.

This is the theme of experiencing and perceiving and naming and conceptualising: knowing. A cluster of issues here. A sequence (or is it a hologram? Or is it both?): occurrence, experience, perception, description, analysis. Let’s try it out first as a sequence.

1. An event or events occur: objects or persons present themselves, in the presence of a person who is currently aware, and whose awareness is turned towards the presenting events.

2. The event(s) are experienced by the person, and focussed on: an emotional impact occurs.

3. The event(s) are perceived (apprehended, grasped) by the person.

4. The event(s) are named (described) by the person: verbal language enters the process.