

## Where in the waste is the wisdom?

By Paul Gordon

‘Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy/and in the withered field where the farmer plows in vain for corn’ - William Blake

The title of my talk, from *Finnegan’s Wake*, is deliberately provocative. There is nothing wrong with provocation; we all need it from time to time. It all depends on the ground from which it comes. It is one thing to provoke from a position of arrogance. It is quite another to say we are all in this together and it is in this latter spirit that I address these words to you today.

### **Ethics**

Ethical is surely the new fashionable word and not just in the world of therapy. The new *Guardian* has an ethical living supplement or feature and everything is ethical these days - investments, trading, even, obscenely, the foreign policy of a country that is one of the largest dealers in arms in the world. I encounter ethical reading, ethical writing, ethical criticism, even the ethical studio, I confess to being at a bit of a loss about what this means sometimes. I sort of get it but we’re in danger of losing the word as we have lost so many - peace, democracy, development, equality, politics fairness, choice.

And of course there is the opposite, the dreaded remark - ‘you/ it is unethical’, guaranteed to strike fear into the object of criticism and to stop whatever it is in its tracks. How common it is to hear these days - ‘Oh that is unethical’ and that puts a stop to it. It has become a word that can close things down rather than open them up

On top of all this, it is so difficult to talk in these terms. How precious it can all sound. But we have to take that risk.

Before we are unable to use the word at all I want to try and use the idea.

Also no one can really use the word as a description. None of us here, for instance, would call ourselves ethical therapists. It would sound precious and preposterous.

Everyone believes they are acting ethically. A few weeks ago while I was preparing this talk I heard a man on the radio - I did not catch his name - who had been imprisoned in North Korea as a political enemy at the age of 9. I have no doubt whatsoever that his captors believed they were acting ethically, in accordance with their views of what was right and wrong, what was justified.

When a doctor offers drugs to someone she believes she is acting ethically. When a doctor offers ECT to someone he believes he is acting ethically - the history of psychiatry is full of this, doctors acting in what they believed were the best interests of their patients.

Too often ethics is seen as being about one's duty and responsibilities, rather than about the questions 'How ought I to live?' or 'What should my life be like?'. We are in deep trouble if we think that ethics is just a question of our ethical codes. Ethics as I have argued many times is about something much richer and deeper than our customary way of thinking about it.

The therapy relationship is an ethical one because therapy lies in the realm of ethos (character) and not in the realm of logos (science and rationality). It is concerned with the character of the patient but also the character of the therapist. It's not that the therapist has to be a flawless character - we are all too human - but someone who is open and at least, to themselves, aware of their own limitations and hence perhaps a bit more understanding of others' failings. (It is precisely this lack of awareness that can make therapists so insufferable as also where a little self knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing and becomes an excuse, an alibi for bad behaviour.)

When I came to write my book, *Face To Face; therapy as ethics*, I was trying to find a theoretical grounding for what I was on about and Levinas, whom I had encountered at the Philadelphia Association during my training, seemed to provide that. Sometimes though I regretted my choice. I was invariably asked when talking did I believe everything Levinas had to say - his dubious views about the feminine for instance or his questionable views on Israel. More simply, here was a very religious man what did I as a deeply unreligious person think I was doing.

For Levinas ethical responsibility, moreover, is the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. It is what constitutes me as a human subject. Ethics does not supplement a preceding existential base; it is not something added on to my being; rather 'the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility'. Responsibility for the other, Levinas says elsewhere, 'establishes the ego. To be a self is to be responsible beyond what one has oneself done'. I exist through the other and for the other.

This certainly spoke to me as a therapist and I thought it might speak to others also - and it is clear that it has.

The implications of this for therapeutic practice ought to be clear. In the therapy session we are concerned solely with this person before us. What she has done or may have done is, in a sense, not our business. We are not here to judge, to grant forgiveness or condemn. And of course the psychotherapeutic relationship is not a reciprocal one. As a psychotherapist, I am there for this other; she is not there for me. Finally, the psychotherapist is not detached. The ethical relationship puts the I in question, in the practice of therapy as elsewhere. How do I respond to what Levinas calls the face of the Other, to the implicit or explicit command 'do not leave me in solitude ... here is my responsibility for the other'.

We cannot know in advance what the content of such responsibility will be, what it will require of us, what demands it will place upon us. Nor can we know beforehand how we should

respond, what we shall have to do. There are no rules or codes to guide us. To use a word much loved by Levinas, we are hostage to the other. Indeed, rules and codes may be a means of defending ourselves from the extent of the responsibility. The kind of ethical responsibility that Levinas is talking about shuns codification and cannot be taught by formal teaching.

I have to admit that since writing my book I have felt more and more the impossible nature of Levinas' ethical demand. Nevertheless in this regard he is, at the very least, worthy of our attention.

### **The ethical space of therapy**

Therapy is one of the few spaces or places where people come to try and make sense of their lives, the people that the great Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci called the insulted and the injured caught up in contradictions of modern life which they are unable to make sense of.

I want to think about the idea of what the philosopher Roger Poole (who sadly died last year) called an ethical space and his idea of an ethical grammar.

In his book *Towards Deep Subjectivity* (1972) Poole argued it was only in philosophical space that ethical space could be retained preserved and understood. It was only here that the other was accorded the total respect due to him as an embodied subjectivity. This was the fundamental principle of all ethics.

We have inwardly died, Poole wrote to the possibility of thinking for ourselves. We expect everything to come from above. Ethical space is a challenge to this.

Of course in the process of thinking for oneself one starts from somewhere; we encounter a thinker or writer and enter his or her world. Then we begin to transform his terms into our terms; a cross-fertilisation begins to happen, a strange spatial mutation, a symbiosis.

Thinking itself was ethical for Poole in transforming the terms of a thinker's system into terms which can be grasped and redeployed in one's own but also because thinking has to stand in relation to terms in the original system. It has to be independent. Above all it has to resist all the false binaries that we are faced with, all the false dichotomies eg Islam or the west. We refuse to be fobbed off with an inadequate pair of terms.

There is no higher level of judgment on philosophical issues; only the intuitive judging consciousness of the individual- 'either understanding becomes existential or it does not come at all'. Even at the limits of our enquiries we are only judging by our lights, as best we can. There can be no final act of judgment just as there is no final prime number. We say in the end 'I believe this to be the case' (or not).

Poole's was deeply radical argument asserting as it did the right of everyone to his or her own ethical space, their subjectivity. There was a rare fundamental respect here for the thoughtful individual.

Is it too much to think psychotherapy might be part of such a thoughtful world - a space for free thinking?

Of course we cannot expect others to be free-thinking if we cannot be so ourselves, or at least if we cannot strive to be so.

So what is this space

It is a space for thought, a space for reflection.

It is a space for complexity against all the simplicities of the day

It is a space for time - and for taking one's time. It is antithetical to today's negation of time with its permanence of now (the mobile phone, the internet etc).

It is a space against so much of the dominant values of the world today - it is not teleological and has no pre-defined goals.

It is a space that is counter to the idea of the instant fix, the instant answer.

The prescription of antidepressants and tranquillisers is out of control. I suspect we all know at least one person that is on something that they really not ought to be on. Only a couple of weeks ago the Guardian published a horrifying article saying that GPs were being told not to prescribe dangerous anti-depressants to under 18s. What shocked me about this wasn't so much that GPs were doling out drugs thought to be dangerous but that they were doling out the drugs at all. Prescriptions for anti-depressants among the under 18s more than doubled between 1995 and 2003. In the USA 1/10 schoolchildren is on ritalin to control their behaviour. Never before in human history, someone remarked recently, has a society so drugged its youth, fed so large a proportion of its minors mind-altering substances.

Psychotherapy of the kind I am arguing for stands against this.

So it's a counter space and as therapists we provide this space. We make it possible. It encompasses what is called the frame but is so much more.

I'm a much better therapist now than I was 10 years ago. Why? Because I hold a space that is more open than I once did.

When I was too concerned to do things

When I was too wedded to ideas

ideas of what to do

and what not to do

‘I would meet you upon this honestly’ - Eliot says somewhere. To me therapy is an honest meeting or an attempt at one.

This is usefully illustrated by the space of the PA community houses which we have kept open against the odds for 40 years. We do not seek to treat people.

We do not presume to tell them what is good for them or best for them. We have no treatment plans or goals.

What we do hold out is a belief in the power of community and part of that is conversation. Anything that makes such conversation possible and more open is to be cherished. Anything that shuts it down is to be questioned

What gets in the way of this honest meeting, this open conversation? It's us - therapists - to a considerable extent, our preconceptions, our prejudices, our desires, especially to help.

The space of therapy is an open space but it's not an empty one. Indeed it is one that is saturated with fears and anxieties and desires, those of the patient and those of the therapist.

So we need a space for thought and reflection and this to me is what therapy is about a space that stands apart from the rush, the now, the results, evidence based culture- a space where people may, as my late colleague Robin Cooper once put it, let their mountains be mountains and not pretend they are molehills. (Robin was rebutting the idea that therapy encourages people to make difficulties out of nothing.)

This is the sort of space that we try to provide in the PA houses that survive against the odds.

What do we do then - we provide a space that is so much against the grain of contemporary life, a space without agendas, without rules other than those necessary to protect the space.

There are simply too many stories of abusive conduct by therapists of their patients, an abuse which has its basis in the very structure of the therapeutic relationship itself. Put simply, any therapy based on the idea that ultimately it is the therapist - and not the patient - who really knows what is going on, contains the seeds of an abusive relationship. How many times do we hear people complain, often not till years after a therapy or analysis has ended, that they simply did not feel heard by their therapist, who sought to impose his own theoretical construction on what was being presented, and who dealt with any questioning or criticism as an assault or envious attack on the therapy and who are frequently held captive in the therapy as a result.

Ethical codes cannot touch such behaviour. Someone may behave quite correctly and yet something much more fundamentally unethical is going on - their attachment to a theory or framework. Many patients come to believe this too. Many people have told me that I am not tough on them, that I let them off some supposed hook. It is a pernicious ideology that people are somehow to blame to who they are or at least their failure to change.

It would of course be possible to write a history of therapy purely in terms of its bad behaviour, its unethical practices - analysts having affairs with the people who came to them for help, or trying to cover up instances of bad practice as Freud (in)famously did with Fliess, or analysing their own children or those of their colleagues.

At least some of the hostility towards Masson surely came from his writing about this. A more sober account and one not limited to psychoanalysis is Peter Lomas's *The Limits of Interpretation* which investigates the potential - I emphasise that word - of all organised therapies for abusive conduct

More recently we have accounts of how Jacques Lacan would read mail or eat sandwiches during sessions - and of course there are the ludicrous stories of a packed waiting room of analysands hoping to be called for their short session by the master. The French analyst Didier Anzieu recalled how Lacan told him 'Don't let my absence stop you continuing your session.' This is a man, let's not forget, who referred his daughter to one of his mistresses for treatment

And then there is the account by the economist Wynne Godley of his treatment by the esteemed Masud Khan, an account that really beggars belief, even more so the fact that Godley was recommended to Khan by the even more esteemed Winnicott who seemed to defend his friend even when what he was doing was indefensible. Moreover, as Godley discovered later, Khan was even in analysis with Winnicott when he was seeing Godley. Khan would take phone calls during sessions, talk about his private life, the famous people he knew, he even invited Godley's wife to a meeting with him. Of course Khan was eventually expelled but not until near the end of his career. In words we should not forget, Godley remarked that good money was paid to give the semblance that good work was being done.

I am sure we can all agree this is terrible. But if I were asked what I thought was the most serious ethical problem in our field I don't think I'd say it was that therapists have affairs with their patients or supposedly recover false memories of abuse from them - although these undoubtedly happen. I'd say that it's something that's not covered by ethical guidelines, the sort of therapy that comes from adherence to dogma, to fixed theoretical models, that is premised on the idea that therapists know better than those they are seeing.

We can probably all agree about this sort of thing but how about some things that may be more familiar to us.

A couple of weeks ago while this talk was looming I found myself in a place of despair about my work - it all seemed pointless, I wasn't helping anyone, people were stuck, I was bored, I was exhausted even though I'd had a month off that I had really enjoyed, I hated - really hated - half of the people I was seeing, I hoped they would cancel and when they turned up I could not wait for them to leave. At times I felt close to screaming.

Of course I had felt all this before but what seemed new was the depth of all that I felt and its persistence. I couldn't see how I could possibly go on seeing people, not in good faith and of course I could not see how I could possibly come here in good faith and talk to you.

Well I am here so something must have shifted. That it did so it's not a little due to those who listened to my complaints. But I do wonder about the ethics of all this. Is it ethical to do what we do, to take on all this suffering in all its manifestations?

I have to say I am not one of those who engages special pleading for what we do. There are many jobs a lot more difficult and unpleasant and which bring a lot less status.

Of course in this regard Winnicott is always the person people refer to, especially his paper 'Hate in the counter-transference'. Therapists, Winnicott said, hate their patients like a mother hates her baby and he listed nearly 20 reasons why a mother feels this. Hate has to be contained until it can be expressed. I'm afraid it's all become a bit of cliché and I am not convinced.

What I am talking about is the stuckness of people, a stuckness - excuse my clinical imprecision - that seems terminal

A far more pessimistic analysis was offered a few years ago by James Hillman at a conference at the Freud Museum here in London. Hillman claimed that the extent of sexual acting out by therapists and the extent of something a lot more ordinary like falling asleep simply testified to the sheer impossibility of the work. For Hillman all this speaks of a unconscious desire to end the analysis. Falling asleep is like sex insofar as it's a fall from self control. The other manifestation of this desire to end the analysis is, Hillman says that of addiction to work. We have all come across the therapists who complain about the amount of work they are doing but say they cannot cut down. This, Hillman says, is in the realm of addiction. Therapy creates its own symptoms and does so because of the narcissistic nature of the encounter; these symptoms threaten individualism in its citadel - 'the double door closed keep of the analytical chamber' - they attest to a breakdown in the model of a therapist which supposes itself immune to movements of the world and of the libido.

Here of course we come up against the hard reality money. We all joke about how we cannot let people go because we need the money but it's true - we do. To be blunt I cannot say to people I feel we have reached the end of our work together for the simple reason that I rely on them. We talk a lot about dependence in therapy but what about our dependence on the patient who pays? Of course we do not talk about such things in polite society so forgive me if I appear a little uncouth. In his recent book *Power, Interest and Psychology* David Smail shows the extent to which Freud was preoccupied with money - 'my mood depends very strongly on my earnings - money is laughing gas for me' - he wrote honestly to his great friend Fliess. Freud also said elsewhere he wasn't really interested in therapy which he did, he said for two reasons, to understand the unconscious and to make a living.

I don't know the answer to this. There is an argument that seeing people for money is in itself unethical but it's not one I accept and certainly the answer is not to do away with private practice altogether I think. What I know of the public sector in this respect is not much better. What is ethical for instance about offering severely disturbed people a maximum of 8 or so sessions, ethical either for the patient or for the therapist who is supposed somehow to help them?

Perhaps like so many things there is nothing to be done but to be honest in this matter as we urge in relation to others.

I want also to mention another strain on the therapist - that of loss. I may have missed something but it does not seem to be much acknowledged that our work as therapists means we are forever making relationships with people to whom we might become quite attached and then they leave. Of course, we want them to do so, this is what it's all about after all. They go off and we never hear from them again and never know a thing about them. It's not only weird but it's a loss. No other relationship is like this. After all if we are estranged from a former partner or spouse or even from a son or daughter we will always be able to hear from others what is going on with them. In therapy we see people for many years sometimes, we are a big part of their life, we know an awful lot about them and we can become very attached to them - and then it's over!

## **Friendship**

I ended my book talking about therapy as a form of friendship and I believe that more and more.

I'm not a doctor and I am most certainly not a priest or religious figure - no authority such as god stands behind me - I represent no one but myself and I am certainly in no position to forgive people or tell them they are doing right or wrong. I find comparisons between therapy and religion - especially the confessional idea - as misplaced and misunderstanding something profound about therapy.

The Greeks placed such importance on friendship because they saw how important it was to live a good life, how friends were sources of self understanding and helped and enabled us to live a good and thoughtful life. It is not that friendship is instrumental - it is a good in itself - but that friends enhance our life by whatever they bring to it, by virtue of who they are.

I'd emphasise the word form; there are surely many kinds. But somehow the idea seems to strike fear into a lot of therapists.

Therapy, unlike religion, is about autonomy. It's about people coming to their own positions through their own reflection and most important in conversation. It is through conversation, as the philosopher Charles Taylor reminds us, that we can truly know what we think and what we feel, test out our thoughts, distinguish the deep from the superficial, the lasting from the passing. The conversation displaces me for a more important we. This, to me, is crucial to therapy. People may well try and put us in the position of the one who knows or the one who has a moral authority but this is something to be explored and to be put into question.

So friendship - a friend, Emerson said, is someone with whom I can think aloud. A lucky man indeed. What do friends do? They know us, they have a sense of who we are, they feel for us, they have our interests at heart. A friend feels for us when we are in difficulty or suffering and feels joy for us when things go well.

The qualities of friendship - acceptance, hospitality, atunement, questioning, suspension of self interest, sense of responsibility. Surely these are some of the qualities of a good therapy?

I know I know this is all pretty ideal stuff and anyone who has had a friend like this is pretty lucky. But it is the ideal I want to talk about, that is what we are aiming at, not the meaner, more tawdry side of friendship that we are all so familiar with.

Anyway we learn from this too, about the failings of people when they let us down - or when we do. Who has not done this? When we cannot quite rise to the occasion, when some less worthy emotion gets in the way - but the point even here is the struggle.

People come to therapists often because they have no friends or because they fear or even know that they are too much for their friends.

I think people recoil from this idea of therapy as a form of friendship not just because they have a technician view of therapy but also because it makes it all a little bit too personal, too close for comfort. Also of course, just as you cannot really say I am an ethical therapist, you cannot really say I am a friendship therapist. It's not really something you can offer. It's something that's there, at least in some respects as a possibility.

But we must also be ware of the pitfalls. We are not friends and the relationship cannot be truly mutual, although I believe there has to be a place for some mutuality. What sort of relating do we think we are fostering if we really expect people not to be interested in us? It's not that I want people to be interested in me and ask me about me but it's significant that people often aren't. I've done it myself - I didn't even notice once when my therapist had her wrist in a plaster. There is a self-centredness that therapy can foster and we need to be aware of this.

So to end *where in the waste is the wisdom?*

Here again is where I think Levinas is important. In his counterposing of wisdom to knowledge. Knowledge is about appropriation. It involves seizing something and making it one's own, reducing it to what Levinas calls the same, denying its difference. This Levinas argues is the dominant strain in western thought with its wish that nothing escape its grasp. It's what Eliot spoke of when he talked of 'only the knowledge of dead secrets/ useless in the darkness into which they peered'.

Beyond this lies what Levinas calls a more urgent form of meaning - that of wisdom

Wisdom is not about facts - I can know or recall lots of fact about someone but still not have a clue as to who they are. Wisdom is about this other quality - it's about responsibility, intuition, what we make of experience, ours and that of others.

Here I find Eliot of the Four Quartets invaluable, for instance when he speaks of how we can have too often the experience but miss the meaning and that the only wisdom we can hope for is the wisdom of humility.

In any case wisdom isn't about sitting somewhere being wise like some sort of sage. Its a practical thing as Aristotle saw and as Peter Lomas has been arguing in relation to therapy for

years. It's an ability, a predisposition, a willingness to be of use to someone, to get involved with their troubles and to give one's thoughts and reflections to them. It's about developing a capacity for trying to do the appropriate thing at the appropriate time in the appropriate way. Wisdom arises, if indeed it does, not from one side or the other but from the in-between. If any wisdom comes from our encounter this morning it comes from that encounter, not from anything I have put on paper. It's a bit like Forster's idea of truth lying not in one realm or another but from - that beautiful phrase - continuous excursions into either realm.

## **The power of art**

In thinking about what I do as a therapist find myself drawn increasingly to writings about art - in all its forms. Art too functions as an ethical space - or can do.

During the summer I read John Carey's book *What good are the arts?* This has to be by far one of the most ignorant books I have come across in a long time, ignorant not in the sense that Carey doesn't know things - he obviously knows a lot - but it's what he does with what he knows that is shocking.

We can all make clever quips about the Nazis reading Heine or Rilke or being moved to tears by Beethoven all the time doing the most appalling things. We can all agree how terrible it is that art has been turned into a commodity and be shocked at the obscene amounts of money people will pay to own a work. But what is obvious is how much the arts do matter to so many people in ways that Carey doesn't even recognise. How many people turn to poetry for instance, either writing it or reading when they need something ordinary language and speech cannot give them, or listen to music or make it. It isn't all by any means 'just entertainment' or a desire for fame however brief.

Art at its best speaks to the part of us that does not feel whole, that wants to reach beyond who we are, to something better.

The artist, even the most solipsistic, by definition produces for a community, addresses a we from an I. Art makes us feel in some way part of a community, a community of feeling - RD Laing one of the founders of the PA and himself an accomplished musician, many years ago spoke of this in relation to music saying that it told him that other people had these feelings, that it made him as a young boy feel less alone in the world,

Similarly David Smail writes of a woman, 'one of the most impressive, abused and tormented people I ever met' who was, he says, 'saved from perdition by a discovery of books and films which among other things showed, to her amazement, the possibility of love'.

Art, like therapy at its best, reminds us of the essentially complex nature of the world and gets us away from ideas of limiting simplicity.

The novel, Milan Kundera argues, tries to subvert man's desire for a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished. Its spirit is that of complexity. It says things are not as simple as you think. This is the eternal truth and this why the novel resists easy summary - that Anna

Karenina is an immoral woman, that Josef K is an innocent man, the victim of authoritarianism. The novel, Kundera says, dealt with the unconscious before Freud, the class struggle before Marx, and practised phenomenology before phenomenology.

But art its best goes further. As the incomparable writer on art and so many other things John Berger puts it, you cannot address the power of art without addressing the principle of hope; the aesthetic inevitably points to a possible future. we live in a world of suffering, where evil is rampant, a world whose events do not confirm our being. This a world to be resisted and in this world the aesthetic offers hope.

I wonder if we really give this sort of engagement the place it deserves in our work. Maybe too much reading, cinema or music etc is just entertainment but to many people it is a lot more but how little it seems to come up in our work. (When I asked students recently to reflect on how the aesthetic came up in their own therapy or in their work people had remarkably little to say.)

Let me quote John Berger again: 'I can't tell you what art does and how it does it, but I know that art has often judged the judges, pleaded revenge to the innocent and shown to the future what the past has suffered, so that it has never been forgotten ....Art when it functions like this becomes a meeting place of the invisible, the irreducible, the enduring, guts and honour.'

One of the great literary pleasures of the past year was discovering the work of the US poet Carl Dennis. He is not a new poet at all, he's in his 60s and has published many books but he is new to me.

It is a long time since I have come across a poet with such a combination of craft, humanity, and wisdom - writing about things that truly matter, without in any way being worthy. Dennis has it seems to me a remarkable, indeed enviable, capacity for empathy, to imagine the feelings and thoughts of others, combined with an enviable freedom from judgementalism, accepting people for who they are or may be - qualities indeed of a good therapist.

In one of his poems he says, 'Nothing confines me'. If we need a motto that will do very well.