

GRACE NOTES XX

How can we take on more social responsibility?
asks **DR SALMA SIDDIQUE**

HANNAH ARENDT (1993) DEFINED social responsibility as both an individual's values and a political presence of belonging or suffering and acting or doing which '...needs the presence of others before whom they can appear.' (Arendt, 1993: 154).

As an educator in the field of counselling and psychotherapy I am surprised at the lack of debate, recognition or acknowledgement, that the problems of clients, their families and communities, may not have originated solely from themselves. There is very little literature in the field of counselling and psychotherapy identifying a discourse of fairness and justice.

I have always felt a sense of responsibility as an educator training therapists, to encourage them to act as ethical practitioners and to minimise adverse effects. In dialogue with therapy trainees at the start of another academic year I pose the question of whether the task of counselling and psychotherapy is to support the client to 'adjust to fit', or to challenge, the system (British). I invite students to question where their role begins and ends with therapy and our relationship with society. What's our role as therapists in the world? I will question the fraying boundary between the external and internal world. If we navigate our life courses between our man-made crises and natural disasters do we sleepwalk through life? In therapy I hear all too often the tragic monologue of survivor's guilt of managing to hold on to a relationship, job or health or social support. Notions of freedom and responsibility (Massey, 2006) vary depending on the context, education, kinship, culture, and religious conviction which ultimately offer a frame through which to view the world. Therefore our life experience shapes, views and influences, behaviours in our ego states. The therapy room is much like a lost and found office where clients unburden themselves of feelings of shame, blame and guilt of not being able to do enough.

In realising my personal power as a partner, friend, colleague and sibling and with my professional power as a therapist and academic I close my eyes and take a 'leap into faith' into the open arms of the totality of experience.

I usually find the experience challenging if not worrying and even frightening! We live in a capitalist society where the measure of worth is usually calculated by how much one is paid by the hour and one must be seen to be productive in order to be valuable to society. Franz Kafka's stories speak of chaos and the absurdity of things in the emerging contemporary scientific-technological world-view of suffering and alienation and offer an interesting metaphor for how one arrives at self-realisation. Maybe Kafka and other novelists understand more than others the human condition of the therapy room as a space where loneliness is experienced and despair is shared. In Kafka's book (1915) *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's life position in society is narrated. Gregor's transformation from man to insect, from mobility to immobility, from resource to burden on family, friends, colleagues and in turn society is shown. Society is quick to reject individuals. Gregor alone and isolated in his bedroom starves to death from neglect. The parental existential messages are that members of society earn their space and place for leisure and happiness through work – this informed Gregor's self-identity – in failing at this he subsequently dies.

More and more I am experiencing the loss of hope in those who are marginalised and in communities that are rendered invisible, and I despair at witnessing the persecution and distrust which can seem all enveloping. We as a profession have generally chosen to fall silent as therapists in the services and institutions we inhabit. As a therapist is there not a social responsibility in creating and maintaining an 'I'm OK, You're OK' (Berne, 1964) social contract of wellbeing and of equity? (English 2006; Massey 2006), are we too caught up in the present despair – how can we take on more social responsibility?

References

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