Book Review

Bernie Neville (2011) *The Life of Things: Therapy and the Soul of the World.* Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books

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It has been said that the outline map of the United States resembles a coffee-can, previously tipped up so that all the dregs bottomed out in Southern California. It has also been said that Carl Rogers' mental faculties paralleled this Californian nose-diving process when he opted to leave the strait-laced surroundings of the American mid-west, birthplace of his copper-bottomed, evidence-based 'scientific' ideas, and settle instead among the loony luminaries, surfing sages, and mystic misfits grooving on 'the Coast'—notwithstanding that this period of Carl's 'Californication' included time hanging out with some of the world's leading physical scientists at the California Institute of Technology.

Combining in this period, mystical California dreamings with newly acquired knowledge from the realm of physical science, Rogers keenly latched onto the views of such individuals as Fritjof Capra, notably Capra's contention that the modern physicist's view of the universe as 'a dynamic, inseparable whole which always includes the observer in an essential way…is very similar to that of Eastern mystics' (quoted in Rogers, 1980, p. 130).

Specifically, Rogers envisaged a counselling client's self-actualizing increase in awareness—as facilitated by the 'core' therapist conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence—to be 'consonant with the directional evolutionary flow', a case at root of mystical attunement with 'a strong formative tendency in our universe, which is evident at all levels' in terms of complex forms emerging from simpler forebears (Rogers, 1981, pp. 128, 134). Such, dreamed Rogers, was the all-pervading order or 'intelligent design' logic to the creative process responsible for forming the cosmos as a seamless dynamic whole inclusive of ourselves.

Barmy views, of course, from the mainstream perspective of today's neo-Darwinian dice-throwing Dawkinites. But not barmy at all in the opinion of intrepid Bernie Neville, author of 'The life of things: therapy and the soul of the world' (2011).

However, what becomes readily apparent as one delves into 'The life of things' is that the reason Neville doesn't regard Rogers' mystical metaphysics as barmy is because Neville is *even more barmy* than Rogers. Uniting Rogers' hypothesis of the formative tendency with some of Rogers' other California conjectures, Neville deems it to be a logical extension of Rogers' latter-day transpersonal theorizing to posit that insofar as 'the self-actualization of the individual is part of a larger process…the basic therapeutic conditions of empathy, acceptance and congruence apply not only to our relations with the individual client but to our relations with the species and the planet' (p. vi).

Quite possibly, at this point, the bemused query of the dedicated trainer in person-centred counselling skills might be, ‘Just what planet is Neville on?’ Training in triad work is difficult enough when three persons are involved; but how on earth does one set about things when the triad is made up of David, a dachshund, and a daffodil? Should or should not one hug a tree?

The point here, though, is that considering Neville really barmy and having a laugh at his expense is an easy exercise when we approach matters from our contemporary, commonsense worldview; and that what has to be remembered, in the lyrics of Ira Gershwin, is that ‘They all laughed at Christopher Columbus when he said the world was round’.

For, as Rogers indicates and what Neville fully appreciates, is that intrinsic to Rogers’ California cognizing is the supposition that a paradigm-shift is in progress apropos our most advanced understanding of ourselves, an understanding which sees our identity defined in terms of our relationships to each other, to all living things, and to the planet as a whole. No longer, highlights Neville, do we best think of ourselves in coolly detached, Cartesian-Newtonian mechanistic terms: namely, ‘as separate, encapsulated egos which communicate by passing information across spaces between them’; but as ‘part of a larger system’, all aspects of which are interconnected, ‘alive’ and dynamic, infused with feeling and evolving (Neville, 2011, p. 24).

In ‘The life of things’, rooting his ideas upon those of Rogers and other key person-centred theorists, it is this emergent vision that Neville attempts to elucidate and elaborate upon, with respect to two forms of caring, in particular: the caring of therapists for their distressed clients and the caring of all humans beings for our distressed planet.

Bidding in this way to go beyond Rogers and put more meat on the bones of this new paradigm, Neville draws upon the ideas of a diverse range of thinkers, all of whom Neville deems share the new fundamental vision of individuals embedded in wholes beyond themselves. Owning the labels ‘organicist’ or ‘organismic’ as terms popularly employed for the philosophical perspective he seeks to expand upon, Neville makes much use of the ideas contained in Whitehead’s ‘philosophy of organism’ or ‘process philosophy’. Apart from whom, the ideas of others that Neville principally draws upon are:

- Carl Jung who signals for Neville deep truths still to be mined in the realm of myth, a realm in which the world is ‘ensouled’ and where mythical gods are viewed as personified modes of apprehension expressive of ancient cultural patterns that still encompass us today, not least in diverse contemporary approaches to psychotherapy.

- Arne Naess, a leading figure in the realm of ecopsychology, who developed the notion of ‘deep ecology’ wherein no essential boundary is conceived between a person’s self and the world, and our individualised experience is considered an aspect of ‘the mind of the world’.

- Jean Gebser, who viewed human culture as historically exhibiting five distinctive ‘structures of consciousness’, structures that again are still with us

in our current conscious experiencing—an interpretation that leads Neville to devote a whole chapter to discussion of the process of counselling a client as 'the five-minded animal'.

In 'The life of things' Neville weaves together discussion of the ideas formulated by the preceding thinkers (and others) into a single narrative that challenges us to think differently—differently from the cold commonsense Cartesian-Newtonian worldview—about the nature of human nature and our place in the world, most pertinently with respect to the practice of psychotherapy and our connection to the life on our planet and the life of our planet.

Taking pains in the rich tapestry of his discussion to avoid any contretemps with postmodernists, Neville describes the views of these various authors as different ways of imagining things. However, notwithstanding their imaginary status, exploration of such views has, he confides, had a real and significant influence on both his approach to therapy and his approach to life itself—and certainly, in my view, Neville's book serves as a rich resource for all those who wish to broaden their horizons in a similar manner.

But this is not all. For, to my mind, the pre-eminent virtue of 'The life of things' is that it furnishes us with an arsenal of consonant ideas and intuitions by which Neville's form of madness can be taken to an even higher level, the level at which the ideas of Rogers, Jung, Gebser, Whitehead, Naess, and company, become seamlessly integrated within the frame of a single overarching paradigmatic theory, a theory that allows realization of the Holy Grail of an 'eco-anthropology', a science of the person with respect to all her/his relationships and intellectual disciplines.

A really crazy thought, perhaps. Poppycock to postmodernists.

But then, again: 'They all laughed at Christopher Columbus when he said the world was round'.

Reference

Rogers, C. R. (1980) *A Way of Being.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin