

The Philosopher and the Practitioner: A Duet

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I first met John in 2006 when Peter Rober and I were presenting a workshop at The Institute of Family Therapy. John asked to sit in on the last day to meet Peter with whom he had been corresponding. He introduced himself as a “conversational junkie” and Peter, John and I went off together after the workshop for a beer. During this first conversation John happened to mention the conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim’s recent Reith lectures and a quote that stuck in his mind. I said that I too had been following the series of lectures and found inspiration for the book I was just finishing writing (see Wilson, 2007). John and I talked about the same quote from Barenboim. It read:

Improvisation is the highest form of art for me because when you see a score for the first time and you don't know it and you don't understand it you have only a gut reaction to it. The first reaction is gut instinct. No matter how talented you are the most talented person in the world will not at first sight be able to analyse. Then we take the music and we analyse it...And at that stage of the proceedings we have lost a lot of the freshness...we have forgotten the gut completely and we are only thinking...But if we play it like this we are not doing any art. We only get to this possible stage of making music the moment we have digested all that and we achieve a kind of conscious naiveté, which allows us to improvise it...At that moment as if it's on the spur of the moment. [Barenboim 2006]

John had registered exactly the same quote from Barenboim and this happy co-incidence started our collaboration. The following ten years of “witness talk” has been an invigorating and creative experience for me: the cooperation between John, the philosopher, and me the practitioner. Of course, this is a false dichotomy: the more we practice the more we refine our thinking. It is more accurate to say that Jim, the practitioner, has philosophy inside his practice just as John, the philosopher, has practice embedded in his ways of thinking.

Before we started offering seminars together I suggested that John take part in my work as a family therapist so we could bring our ways of practising together into the real life experiences of therapy. The joint action of trying to provide a useful service for people pushes abstract theorising of an event into the long grass, leaving room to work directly inside the emergent atmospheric and complexities of real time practice. Gianfranco Cecchin used to say, “when we enter the therapy room it’s a good idea to leave our theories at the door” (personal communication) because we attend to what is happening right now, not trying to superimpose a model onto the people seeking our help. John’s work focuses attention on the minute detail of what “just happens” and emphasises spontaneity in responsiveness in our dealings as therapists. In saying this I am also a practitioner who uses ideas, theories, techniques, and all the rest of a therapist’s repertoire to help me figure out how best to go on in our work. Spontaneous responsiveness comes from a rigorous form of preparedness to be open to what “just happens” and, in seminars, John is inclined to demonstrate this idea by performing a tennis player preparing for the

big match against his opponent by rehearsing and trying out his strokes so that in the actual performance, the tennis player spontaneously responds to what his opponent's trick shots and strokes fire at him. The tennis player is prepared but has not planned in the sense of deciding beforehand exactly how things will go. The point is about noticing what may be useful or called for within any emerging context.

Inspiring Connections

The person, his words, and the saying of them are not separate items. John's writings are complex because our ways of meeting with others in life is simply complex. He shines a light on the nuances of how we are in touch with one another and there are two particular ways in which his work has provided a rich stimulus to my practice over the years. The first inspiration is in appreciating more fully that meeting with another person is a profoundly human endeavour. We are not simply "talking heads." We do not meet as if in an "experiment." The emphasis placed on embodied responsiveness draws the practitioner towards a more three dimensional, rounded, engagement with clients that prefigure cognition about what is going on in human communication.

The second inspiration is the coupling of his appreciation of with-ness thinking (and doing) with a socio-political critique of theories that categorise and objectify human beings. "We are old socialists," he tells workshop participants. And so we are. Here is the political activist in Shotter's critique of academia. To my eyes, John thrives in the fertile borderlands of any discipline or organisational terrain. Therapists can also do the same. The dweller in the borderlands needs to be rooted enough in the culture of a discipline but free enough to move and challenge those barren areas of thought and action that fail to grasp alternative ways of seeing, or the contradictions within any dominant professional ideology. For the family therapist, this is where irreverence, experimentation and creative doubt find confluence with John's tributaries of "upstream thinking." His is a critical voice within academic psychology; it can be a lonely place and he finds filial connection with therapists like me who do the same with respect to orthodoxy in therapy practices.

John's position is to provide provocative challenges to those who would have us believe that science will provide all the answers to complex matters of human experience. His is a form of courage seen not as fearlessness but rather a form of "wise fear" that leads us to action because what we believe in is worth pursuing rather than remaining in silence. He may be a conversational junkie but if so, his addiction is to point to something better in the ways we try to be in touch with one another. Instead of hunting for definitive truths "after the fact" we, instead, give priority to the immediacy of connection and the possibilities that emerge from what may be the most "ordinary" of beginning exchanges.

Everyday conversational exchanges become a rich source of appreciation in John's thinking and, indeed, such apparently ordinary everyday occurrences are highly significant in the way we meet with another. If the meeting is imbued with problem talk or only of diagnostic categories, our conversation becomes thinned down, missing opportunities for connection that can come from a gesture or a small, hesitantly offered, expression. John points us towards the detail and the complexity of what it means to be in touch with one another. He urges the practitioner to value

the significance of so-called ordinary “wordings” and their importance in binding the social matrix in our meeting with others. Informal ordinary chat is not the precursor to getting down to the serious business of “problem talk.” It’s quite the reverse; the meeting is the medium in which possibilities begin to arise and take shape. These are contours of meaning, not fixed states. It is this focus on the emergent, dynamic and improvisational quality of communication that sits comfortably with an orientation to practice that is essentially experimental without being “off the wall.” His philosophical critiques provide powerful antidotes to the drudgery of repeat prescriptions of so much prescribed practices that threaten to dehumanise what we do – he invites practitioners to see there is more to our being with others than meets the manualised eye. In so doing, we are encouraged to look to the many possibilities in how we connect with a sense of hospitality towards our clients. He is in effect saying, “After you!”

Words Are a Form of Music and so Is Movement

I am meeting a group of family therapists for the first time and I am asked to sit behind the one-way screen to observe the session. When I sit down I notice that the reflection from the TV screen in the observation room has obscured the father’s face in the family. His face has been superimposed by a computer screen that stops me from seeing his expressions. In the end, I ask if the TV can be turned away and at once I am able to take in the face of the man and attend to the expressions that move across his face. McNamee (2016) mentions John’s wish that communication had not been divided into words (verbal) and nonverbal language since all is language. If therapists paid as much attention to the language of movement, gesture and so on as we do to selecting the appropriate words to use, we would be more in touch with a much wider repertoire of potential connection with our clients. The computer screen can limit our vision, restrict our creative potential and reduce complexity to some words that simplify what we do. In so doing, we squeeze the vitality out of practice to make it fit the box on the screen.

I play the guitar and recently I was invited to sit in with other musicians who had played together as a group for many years. The band allowed me to join them but I was the new “kid on the block” so I had to make sure I didn’t put myself forward in too pushy a manner. At the same time, though, I had to show I could measure up, and sitting back too much would also be a mistake. Instead, I waited to hear what others were playing and tried the best I could to add something to what was already being played. I had to be an accompanist. At a certain point, the group leader gave me the “nod” – the signal that I was invited to take a solo, which I did with relish. Later, I pondered on this sequence and wondered what had led the group leader to give me the “nod” when he did. Fortunately, I met with him a couple of months after the gig and was able to ask the question on my mind. He thought for a moment before saying, “I listen. I listen to what everyone is doing and, when I listen, I can hear what could work so then I gave you the nod.” This is an expression of relational knowing, not the atomised business of separating out the individual musicians into their specific contributions, but a response to what the music needed at that moment. The nod is what we wait for from our clients. It is these special invitational moments on which John helps practitioners really focus attention. He provokes practitioners to sense what emerges in our responsiveness and not fall prey to the allure that we can somehow *make* another person respond in a direction we have already set in motion. John invites practitioners to develop a freedom of movement in practice that allows for the “conscious naiveté” that permits us to play as if on the spur of the moment. One of John’s “Shotterisms” fits

here: “Ask not what goes inside a person’s head but ask what their heads go inside of” (McNamee 2016).

In preparing for this talk, I realised that John’s influence is incremental. I hear him talk; we share ideas and I read his work. But it was when asked to make this presentation on his influence that I had the opportunity to take stock. This exercise has not only allowed me to articulate his influence but to show my deep appreciation of John’s contribution to my work and the stimulation his work offers to others. “Hope is not an expectation that something gets well, but the expectation that what we are doing makes sense, never mind how it turns out.” This quote from Vaclav Havel resonates with John’s passion for keeping our connections with one another a profoundly organic human endeavour. As he likes to say, “We are more like plants than computers.”

To orient myself towards not just our collegiate relationship but the friendship that comes with playing and performing together, here is my version of a song by John Martyn about friendship, loyalty and a wish for a better way of being and becoming in our world.

It’s called “May You Never.”

*May you never lay your head down
Without a hand to hold
May you never make your bed out in the cold?
Just like a big strong brother of mine
I know that your love is true
And you don’t talk dirty behind my back and I know that there’s those that do so please wont you
Please wont you
Bear it in mind:
Love is a lesson to learn in our time
And please won’t you bear it in mind for me*

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