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Who Is It Coming Through The Door?
A Reflection on Psychotherapeutic Theory and Voice Movement Therapy.

By Veronica Phillips VMTR, Dip. Counselling, MBACP

" Wanderlust,
Relentlessly seeking wanderlust,
Peel off the layers,
Until you get to the core."
(Bjork ,Sjon 2007)

"Conditioning is like a knot that uses the mind as a rope to strangle the heart"
(David Brazier. 1995 page 69)

"We hope that – he will finally come to really hear and feel the music of life and be able to play all its notes from its core."
(Johnson 1994, page 289)

Voice Movement Therapy offers life-affirming and life-enhancing possibilities to people in many different situations. For example: with the elderly, VMT can stimulate and enhance physical wellbeing and expand pleasure in living; with those who have physical and/or mental special needs, VMT aids the development of coordination of being, brings pleasure and efficacy in voicing and helps control and add to the fluidity of body movement; VMT can be of great effect in situations of conflict, allowing a breathing space and expansion of voicing in which those in conflict can find resonance with and compassion for each other. In VMT I tend to work in conjunction with psychotherapy. The majority of those who attend sessions with me want to peel off layers of conditioning and insecurity and to free the flow of deep, authentic core voice; to give expression to the authentic truth of self; to liberate heart and soul; to offer the healthy, becoming self fuller being.

"Who is it coming through the door?" I wonder, with a frisson of apprehension. In what measure are the always present aspects of self - adaptive, traumatised or healthy and dancing – accessible? The client looks questioning, unsure, excited, and apprehensive. So we meet for the first time and begin: two anxious people in the room together.

We talk: about reasons for coming: Why now? About the client's feelings about his voice, about his wishes and goals for the work we will do, and about practicalities. Intimations of distress, disturbance, early conditioning, become apparent through body posture and movement, breath and voice.

Cues and clues about the client's state and patterning can emerge through a few pertinent questions, particularly about his *(In this paper, for the purposes of clarity, the client will be referred to generally as "he" and the therapist as "she")* vocal life and attitude to his voice and attention to one's own reactions and bodily sensations: deep listening to how the client presents himself. Presenting most often masks deeper needs, for example: someone with a gentle, held back, breathy voice may, in the first place, want to find a stronger, more projecting voice: the deeper need might very well indicate a dominated, fearful, obedient childhood. Another who speaks very fast with youthful 'bubbliness' may have a sense that he must get out everything in order to be heard; there may be a sense of panic which could point to a childhood feeling and/or experience of early abandonment and a holding on to this adaptive self. Yet another may be quite frustrating to the practitioner in constantly rebuffing invitations and suggestions, often symptomatic of crushing defeat of wishes and wants early on so that:

> *"the pattern of self-defeat has become--- defeating and abusive to others and extraordinarily resistant to attempts to change it ." (Johnson 1994, 193)*

Of course, we start where the client is and are always led by how he presents. But what might increase our empathic connection, support and enhance our intuition? What might extend or deepen our feelings of unconditional positive regard and give direction and weight to our empathic response? What might help us to colour our response with a quality that this particular person needs? What might help us to choose whether our response might be gently reflected back as straight-forward understanding or affirmation, or a more strongly evocative response, or more probing? What might lead us nearer to the fragile heart of the trapped feeling our work seeks to free?

In my experience, practising the artistic, creative work of VMT and witnessing its therapeutic benefits, there is much to be gained from exploring various developmental and psychotherapeutic theories. A deepening awareness of a person's early life conditioning really helps me connect with greater compassion and offers me a more nuanced understanding. There is, however, no substitute for the mindful intuition and presence of the facilitator.
This article is intended to highlight some of the "mapping" possibilities from my integrative,

psychodynamic psychotherapy training and study that I find valuable in my work as a VMT practitioner. Inklings of awareness as to a client's post-birth conditioning, how and at what stage needs have not been met or have been actively 'squashed', to what degree the pattern set up by "Interrupted reaching out" can provide me with valuable information. Such can enhance focus and resonance between enabler and client. No map is definitive; they are only maps, but all are intriguing, interesting, insightful. Here I intend just to offer support for what we already know and intuit in VMT. Theory may sit firmly in the head, but it has always been a great delight to me to witness theory becoming embodied in place, person and voice. In this article I will in particular consider **Attachment Theory** and **Character Style.**

ATTACHMENT THEORY

> *"Strivings for attachment are the strongest motivators in human behaviour."*
>
> *(Eppel, 2009, 11)*

ATTACHMENT THEORY continues to develop in importance and effect since John Bowlby coined the term in the 1950's. Perceiving a client's attachment disturbance gives information and some insight into ways of helping the client find the "secure base" desirous for the healthy start in life. Already the facilitator has become, in varying degrees, a secondary attachment figure providing security of place, time and attentive work in sessions. Recognizing the roots and presentation of the nuances of **Insecure Attachment** is helpful in VMT work so as to enhance our awareness and response to the uniqueness of each individual.

Avoidant Attachment may well begin very early if a new or recently born individual catches an unsmiling, uninterested face when seeking pleasure and approbation. The neonate's instinctive disappointed turning away is difficult to change. The development of avoidance, for whatever reason, is clear when a client finds eye contact difficult and uncomfortable. It may have been initially caused by insensitive nurturing and, in particular, a lack of physical soothing.

One such client, Mike, indeed found working "en face" too challenging, so I usually positioned myself to one side, especially at the start of our work. He had endured many difficulties in his life, always choosing to work things out alone, often typical of those who carry this sense of rejection. Similarly characteristically, he often rejected my suggestions.

Frustrating though I found this, it was important to trust the process alive in his opposition and resist being too pressurising or confrontational. Keeping control of external circumstances is a major way for someone insecure in this way to manage feelings. The need or desire to trust another has been suppressed, love mistrusted. Mike distanced himself from connection even with his own body: his injured leg became "the leg," not "my leg;" his monotonous voice, "the voice;" he acknowledged anxiety with "there is anxiety," rather than allowing, "I feel anxious." Characteristic difficulty with being addressed directly was best served here with emphasis on VMT "techniques," as referred to below, and focused on things outside ourselves.

Mike already enjoyed a pleasant Flute/Clarinet voice and expanded both his voice and the beginning of easier connection with another human being as we improvised together with these timbres in a quasi-early music polyphony. He chose to sing a number of songs, beginning as he had previously learnt and in a way previously acceptable; that is, in a sweet, contained and quiet manner. Introducing Saxophone encouraged loudness, in addition enabling me to address more directly Mike's shallow, chest breathing.

Gradually, he could feel safe enough to address feelings more directly. When he dared to sing "Motherless Child," this opened up the grief of the loss of his mother who had first introduced this song to him. She had died some twenty years previously

while he was abroad. Through this song he revisited the good times of his childhood spent with her and was able to sing and sound the goodbye that had eluded him.

More open connection with deeply internal feeling became increasingly available to Mike, especially in Voice Movement Journeys. External focus was still important and effective: mask work enabled deeply held rage to be vocalized, which gave Mike the impetus to embody Feline/Canine which he called "Cat." The death of Heath Ledger stirred profound feelings of loss; it seemed that a shared ritual to mourn his passing was appropriate, with silence and voicing, a spontaneous altar and candle. My sense is that my respect and sharing of his grief in this way helped Mike to a more expansive, less contracted security with himself. Subsequently, he was much more able to explore and express his more personal grief and regret about the vicissitudes of his earlier life. By the time our work ended, Mike had begun to widen reasons for choices, not always making them in his previous protective habitual opposition. He had also found a more colourful speaking voice and a much more flexible, varied singing voice.

Ambivalent Attachment is characterised by a great desire to be validated and accepted, with a simultaneous fear of being seen. This child has experienced a high degree of unmet needs and unreliable care. One client, Susan, manifested this ambivalent anxiety even before we met. She postponed the initial session several times. This insured she was in my thoughts: often such clients are very present in one's thoughts between sessions.

On meeting her I was struck by the her fear and her desire to acquiesce, held in a stiff body which moved in an angular balletic, doll- like way. This manner of being had helped her, as a child, to hide her vulnerability and feel approval from her parents. Our work began with encouraging body flow through breath and movement. After establishing a sense of grounding through the feet, we explored small convex and concave movements, particularly attending to hands and arms. These movements extended to the torso and the whole body and moved into Spherical Space with relative ease. Susan enjoyed the freedom and spaciousness of Spherical Space and could move with some assurance around the large working space, with ease of breath and free voice. However, her arms and upper torso continued to hold much tension. Her childhood history strongly intimated psychological and emotional tension developing from being an unmet infant reaching out.

Amplifying the felt sense of stiffness in her arms led Susan to become aware of a sickness in her heart area. She likened this to a ball made of thin rubber strips. She asked for help to deal with this, so together we voiced and I pulled at the imaginary strips. Once drawn out of her, Susan hurled the ball into the ocean with a strong arm movement and voice, repeating this several times. As well as realizing a feeling of release, freedom and empowerment, the different experience of attachment, being met and supported, opened the way for a new possibility of being.

The voice Susan came with was usually bright, nasal and childlike; we stayed almost exclusively with this voice for some eight sessions while she re-experienced her infant need to reach out. We worked a lot with the fearful and the playful child, with movement, free voicing and songs, but it was most clearly the Magical child who helped her move on to a whole spectrum of aspects of self: to connect with and develop vocal timbre, register and dynamic particularly.

Using her bright, nasal voice and singing: "Fly Me to the Moon," she found her playful, magical child self flying on a large bird. I suggested a free voice dialogue between the two and then becoming the bird swooping over the landscape. This gave Susan leave, as it were, to realise all kinds of subpersonalities: Lion, Squaw, Trickster, Bully, Waif and more. It was important that she begin to grasp and find confidence in her own discovery, to encourage and validate herself. This she did with

ever-increasing authority, centeredness and power in her voice and in her being. She was able to express rage, love, desolation, longing and find a balance in the imperfection and ambivalence of life, other people and herself. Unusually, she worked with me for a comparatively long time, some 150 sessions; a length and consistency which engendered secure enough self-attachment, a flexible, many coloured voice in a fluid body and a confidence that led to her becoming a very good enough Mother herself.

Disorganised Attachment: The child in this category is likely to have been actively frightened of his caregiver and traumatised. I will combine my client description here with the developing Character Styles explored further on. For someone who has had to cope with such a difficult beginning, panic and unregulated distress can be tangible. Hyper-vigilant Fight/Flight reaction is easily triggered and they may well need the facilitator to spend a lot of time calming them down. The client's state of panic and unregulated distress can be tangible, leading to disorganisation and inability to concentrate. Often there is numbness and freezing. This client needs safety and security first and foremost: slow, sustained connection with the facilitator able to follow and hold each traumatised manifestation by holding and resonating with shared breathing and movement, instigated by the client; grounding the body; bringing the client into the reality of the room and of being present with the facilitator.

Dissociation may be a real possibility here. People can be poly-fragmented, torn and drawn in different directions by many internal aspects. Here, particularly, working with these *"Vital elements of being" (Ferruci, quoted in Rowan 1990, 75), S*ub-personalities or Complexes, so prevalent in VMT, are especially important. Someone so distressingly split in many directions can form extremely positive internal attachments. This can then enable a greater capacity to cope with, understand and express moods and feeling states and not become completely submerged in them:

> *"If I feel cut off, I can look inside and see who feels the same; then I can smile and hold their hand; we can talk and listen to each other."*
> *(Workshop participant)*

Such internal relationships can give someone an independent, satisfying self-nurture and are valuable in developing relationships with flesh-and-blood others.

CHARACTER STYLES

The nascence of attachment needs expands naturally into a variety of defensive, adaptive character styles which seek both to replace the unmet need and defend against its lack. The child's perception, at both conscious and unconscious levels, of the parent's intended or unintended attitude can be extremely severe and traumatic. In his book, *Character Styles*, Stephen Johnson explores with great warmth and clarity the child's perception and response to the strictures that he faces at different developmental stages. Although categorised, there is much overlap and mix; reactions and responses of body, mind and psyche usually resonate with restrictions and unmet need in several instances. I find Johnson's mapping exceptionally useful and compassionate. He develops his ideas from the Character Structure work of Freud, Klein, Kohut and others, and descriptions in DSM-IV. I find the cited category titles themselves compelling and summarise briefly, as follows:

The "**Hated Child**" is the child who felt dismissed at birth, who feels he has no right to exist;

The "**Abandoned Child**" comes very soon after and cannot allow himself to need;

The "**Owned Child**" is one who has been prevented from natural attempts at separation, for whom opposition and aggression are dangerous, whose move to independence poses some threat to the

parent. This can begin around 10 months, more likely from 15 to 24 months.

The "**Used Child**" undergoes a deep and critical wounding of the truth of his being, again from 15-24 months. This is tantamount to the parent saying "I will only love you if you are what I want you to be." A client may present as very grandiose in her ideas, at the same time extremely lacking in self-esteem, symptomatic of "pure" narcissism, a term Johnson (Johnson 1994, 157) used to differentiate from narcissistic overlay in other Character Structures;

The "**Defeated Child**" has undergone a breaking of his will around 2 years old;

The "**Exploited Child**": Here Johnson is talking of the mild to profound continuum that develops as a result of sexual and/or physical exploitation and abuse. The individual's defence system is complex, as there are usually a number of complicit people involved in the early trauma. The polarised aspects of being can be very clear, alternating between "good" and "bad";

The "**Disciplined Child**" is the result of extremely rigid, but loving parenting, manifesting the need to be perfect, but never in touch with themselves. *"through love autonomy has been stolen." (Johnson 1994, 288)*

JONATHAN

Jonathan is an American in his mid 40's whom I saw for 12 sessions. His goals for our work were many, including a powerful wish to be rid of bodily tension and exhaustion and his habitual defences; and to work through and diminish his very strong fear and the turmoil of his feelings and emotions. The extent of his needs was, in part, evidence of the pressure he put on himself in striving for perfection. The effort involved extended his pain as well as anaesthetizing it. Both his voice and his body evidenced enormous holding of frozen trauma. In terms of Attachment, for him it was Disorganised; regarding Character Structure, there was ample evidence of the "hated," "abandoned" and "defeated" child. Jonathan's mothering had been unstable and erratic; as a child he was passed from carer to carer, becoming cut off and isolated. Intimacy and trust in relationship became unavailable. Jonathan became split and would dissociate.

Stress was extremely apparent in both body and voice: visible tension in shoulders and rigidly held head, breath shallow with no belly connection, voice forced and disruptive with little or no chest or belly resonance and caught in the throat. He vacillated between feeling proud of his achievements and talent and an extremely vulnerable sense of unworthiness, almost to the point of despair. In every session there were two or three moments, at least, of dissociation: sometimes he could not go on; sometimes he could pick up and explore further what had, in the moment, triggered this dissociation. Often he wanted to hide, both from me and from those by whom he felt so cruelly dismissed.

The tension extended throughout his body: this well built, sturdy middle-aged man could not sustain standing for very long. For much of the initial three to four sessions, I invited Jonathan to lie on the floor, which slowed him down. It offered him the chance to return to a foetal position in a different relationship, and to gain a strong sense of grounding. With his acquiescence, I massaged and held his back, at the same time voicing an improvised wordless lullaby: touching with hands and voice. He began to breathe more smoothly and gently, sporadically joining in with the lullaby, learning to self-soothe. Thus began a little melting of the sense of hate, abandonment and defeat, with another person and within himself. The sporadic shudders he often felt, which up to this point had worried him, manifested in this session, too, but subsequently lessened greatly.

For session five, I invited Jonathan to bring a photo of his infant/young self. This led to a connection with

his six-year-old self whom he called “Jon.” Jonathan now chose to stand up; he felt somewhat less bodily discomfort now and could be present in the room and look at me fully. My massaging his feet and then shoulders, back and chest while he breathed led to his massaging his own chest, face, jaw. Sounding in Flute and Clarinet enabled him to connect and stay with the deep pain in his chest and heart.

After a while, the grief and loss in the voice of pain turned to rage at his abandonment. The voice of rage sounded in Clarinet and disruption, loudly. When he reverted to words, he fell again into his defeated self. An invitation from me to return to the sounding voice of anger provided a perfect opportunity for Jonathan to explore his difficulty with saying “No.” The answer to me had been “no,” but quiet and acquiescent. It might have been appropriate to explore more precisely to whom and about what he was saying “no,” but encouraging a new bodily experience provided more impetus. I invited him to voice “No!” more loudly, more bodily, more forcefully, with more authority. He found this exciting and pleasurable, moving away from me to a burst of wordy, growling rage towards his family, released from the body by beating and wringing a cushion. So, the more pedantic, cerebral questions of “Who?” and “What?” were effectively answered anyway!

Jonathan had so much wanted to reconnect with his own songs, which mainly spoke of his loss of adult love. The bodily and psychic strength he found at this point gave him leave to sing a beautiful song about the break-up of a relationship. He sang without his valued guitar as a prop, quite a risk for him. Each time he sang, the body, breath, soul connection became more flowing and he was able to say: “That wasn't as difficult as I anticipated!”

Prolonged movement toward more fluid, open being and the growth of bodily and vocal strength led Jonathan to discover gradually that he could sometimes observe the imprisoning difficulties he held on to and lessen their dominance. He had already found he could welcome and embrace “Jon,” having fun and expressing anger. For both of us it was powerful and exciting to experience the connection and integration of many aspects of himself in moving and voicing a story he had written which contained many voices, including dark “Shadow” aspects. The hint of core self in the writing was deeply experienced and extended through a VMT approach.

In my work as a VMT practitioner, I prefer the sense that layers melt and transform rather than peel off. Somehow, “melting” invites expansion, whereas “peeling” contracts! With the former there is a sense of growth, lightening, and allowing of the endless fascinating layers of our humanness, layers that shimmer and dance both from and around our elusive core.

The two theories I have considered are just two maps among many that may support our work. For me, both Attachment Theory and Character Styles provide footholds which help me ground the reality and depth of each person. Understanding enhances resonance, increasing my perception of:

“Faces so tenderly beautiful
We wonder with what untaught knowledge seen
Beyond the commonplace the hidden aspects of mystery, secrets
Known only to the soul...”
(Kathleen Raine c. 1953 .2000)

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