

Finding a New Place to Stand: A Conversation with Colin Wrennall about Farming and Psychotherapy

Colin Wrennall and Keith Tudor

PSYCHODRAMATIST AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST, AUCKLAND AND PAPAROA, NORTHLAND,
PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOTHERAPY, AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, AUCKLAND

Abstract

This article is based on an interview of Colin Wrennall conducted by Keith Tudor. We first met as a result of Keith contacting Colin with regard to *The Book of Evan*, and got to know each other more through some further conversations. The interview itself was conducted in a conversational style; the resulting article is based on a transcription of the interview and subsequent research, and further writing and editing. The article focuses on and covers Colin's background and work in farming and psychotherapy and, specifically, psychodrama, and discusses the interplay between these two worlds. Following this and drawing on matters arising from the first part of our recorded conversation and subsequent writing, in the second part of the article, we discuss the phenomenon of our ageing practitioner community, sustainable professional development, and succession-planning.

Whakarāpopotonga

Ko te uiuinga o Kōrini Werenara e Kihi Tūhoro te tūāpapa o tēnei kōrero. I ara ake te tūtakitanga tuatahi i te whakapānga atu o Kihi i a Kōrini mō te pukapuka *Te Pukapuka o Ēwana*, ā, ka mōhio pai ake i a māua mai i ngā kōrerorero hangai muri ake. He kōrero te momo hiki i te pātaitai, hoi anō nō te hopu reo o taua uiuinga me ngā rangahau te pūtake o tēnei tuhinga. Ka arotake tēnei tuhinga i te whakatipuranga ake o Kōrini me tāna mahi kaipāmu, me te mahi whakaora hinengaro pokapū tonu ki te whakatautau hinengaro, ka matapakihia ai i te haeretahinga o ēnei ao e rua. I muri ake mai i nga take ara ake i te wāhanga tuatahi o te hopunga reo me ngā tuhinga i tuhia, i roto i te wāhanga tuarua o te pepa, ka matapakihia te āhua o te taipakeke haere o te hunga mahi o te hāpori, te pupuri whanake ngoio me te whakatakotoranga-tauatanga.

Wrennall, C., & Tudor, K. (2017). Finding a new place to stand: A conversation with Colin Wrennall about farming and psychotherapy. *Ata: Journal of Psychotherapy Aotearoa New Zealand*, 21(2), 177-194. <https://doi.org/10.9791/ajpanz.2017.16>

Keywords: farming; the land; psychotherapy; psychodrama; ageing; sustainable development; succession-planning

Warm-up

Keith: Tēnā koe, Colin. Nau mai, haere mai i te kaupapa o te rā. Thank you for agreeing to do this.

In order to set the context for the reader, I should say that we first met during the course of the editing of *The Book of Evan* (Sherrard, 2017), when you lent me some books on psychodrama. I remember that it was raining; you invited me in and offered me a drink. We got chatting about Evan, you, and psychodrama, and you told me about that day you took him to your farm. Both your welcome and the story were warming and I was delighted that you took up my invitation to write up that experience, which is a delightful contribution to that book and that part of Evan's life (Wrennall, 2017). This warmth was further fanned for me when we met more recently and talked easily and passionately about our experiences in the field of psychotherapy and about our experience of and the requirements of personal therapy during training, and different therapy communities and associations. For me, something in that conversation clicked, which I wanted to pursue with you and to share with a wider audience.

Colin: I agree. The conversation we had was engaging, creative and mutually reflective. We both warmed up well, sharing our joint histories and experiences; and we became enlivened, passionate, interested, stimulated, and productive about the experience and requirements of personal therapy, the responsibility clinicians hold in their training journeys and their client-related work and life positions. We dialogued unreservedly from the position of being older clinicians looking back over the changing culture of three decades of clinical training and developments in therapy, including the change in the transference relationship between trainees and their trainers and supervisors over that time.

Keith: Also, you facilitated this warm-up by sending me a copy of your psychodrama thesis (Wrennall, 2012), which I read with interest, not least for its references to farming, so perhaps we can begin there?

Farming

Colin: How did I get into farming? My godparents were farmers, so I spent my school holiday life on their farm: most of the school holidays from nought upwards. So that was the foundation of my farming career, then I left home when I was 16 and went farming and worked my way up through various jobs, from waged jobs to managing. When I was 19 I ran the breeding unit at one of the five largest piggeries in New Zealand and I loved that. I loved production-line farming because that's about producing a weekly output. I still farm that way. I left that job after two years, came to Auckland and worked on another large piggery out here in West Auckland. At this stage, Maxine and I got married and, over time, had three children. We went

share-milking and built up from 100 cows to 150, and then to 300. We sold half of them and bought our first farm in Waipu when I was 29. I owned that farm from '82 to '92 and went through some very difficult times. The first year was one of the hardest droughts we've had in New Zealand, and we took a major loss. There was another drought in '85, and our marriage broke down. Then came the Labour government and Rogernomics (see Douglas, 1980; Dalziel, 1989) and massive increases in interest rates. We eventually sold the farm in '91, and I came back to Auckland, started training as an alcohol and drug counsellor, psychodramatist, family therapist and, eventually, as a psychotherapist.

Keith: Before we discuss your journey into psychotherapy, let's stay with farming. At the beginning of your psychodrama thesis, you make some links between farming and therapy, and offer some poignant descriptions about herd animals and place and regulation. Is there a connection between this and your interest in an approach, psychodrama, which is very much based on and in the group?

Colin: Absolutely. With animals, you're always in relationship with the herd system — pack, flock, etc. — there's a hierarchy or pecking order.

Understanding which animal is down, on the outside, left out or excluded, being bullied, is a classic group dynamic leader requirement. In the herd, there's always an inclusion/exclusion process going on, and managing the herd and the hierarchy of the herd is no different to human behaviour. Also, my view is that, in psychotherapy, you're in relationship with the early verbal and pre-verbal, and that to me was — and is — one of the distinctions between *psychotherapy* versus more here-and-now therapy or counselling models. In psychotherapy, I'm always assessing current behaviour and holding in mind which of the corresponding early developmental tasks underpin this response, and responding to those developmental stages. Psychodrama seeks to assist the protagonist to replicate their family system, social system, organisational system, as well as personal sets of role responses in relationship to that system — the social atom and culture atom (which are the principal diagnostic assessment tools used in psychodrama). Psychodrama also gives the protagonist the opportunity to enact their experience of the system, allowing them to observe through their own eyes, the eyes of the auxiliary in their system: their own and others' responses. One of the key therapeutic elements that occurs, comes from the visual production of their internal dramatic world, which enables the protagonist to explore, understand, see, and reverse roles with their antagonist. Then, through the process of role reversal, the psychodramatic enactment allows the protagonist to move to a new response in an old situation, to rise to a new value system, to develop a new role, and to change their role response to a new progressive response.

Keith: I agree, 'though I think the way you describe it is unusual and striking and offers us a different kind of insight. You emphasise the pre-verbal and, indeed, the non-verbal precisely because of your experience with animals. I think that has given you a specific sensitivity to picking up and working with behaviour which, as you say, has early, developmental origins.

Colin: For a long time I kept that thinking hidden. I didn't disclose that a lot of what I drew on was from farming, until I had a conversation with Chris Hoskins, a

psychodrama trainer, who said she did the same. Her work as a child therapist drew from her understanding of and work with animals. In my experience, when we — I, Chris, or others — draw the analogy between animals and humans, the next response is often a rejecting one, “But we’re not animals”. It wasn’t until later that I developed the internal permission to “come out” about the influence that working with animals has had on my work and development as a psychotherapist.

Keith: In your dissertation, you refer to Moreno’s (1977) concept of the “social placenta”. Given the connection in te Ao Māori between placenta (whenua) and land (whenua) and the indigenous people of the land (tangata whenua), I wondered whether, in your upbringing and in farming the land, you were introduced to or influenced by indigenous ideas and practices?

Colin: Not really, no.

I grew up with very traditional farming methods, really: the traditional 1950s and ’60s school of farming methods: the land development encouragement loans; the livestock incentive schemes; and, generally, the emphasis on increased production. “Put plenty of fertiliser on, and maximise your production”. “There’s a swamp down there; clean it up” — so it can be brought into production. That was my farming background and training, and the philosophy, as it were, of all the advice we were given by the then Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, backed by previous governments, and a social system that said if you want to get the country out of difficulty, you saddle a young farmer with a big mortgage, increase production on every piece of land, maximise the country’s exports and earning capacity, and enjoy the lucrative lifestyle. Back then, ideas such as “mothering the land” would have referred to or been framed in terms of expanding production.

Nowadays, there is a stronger ecological approach, including an appreciation for a certain lack of “mothering” of our land by some, and more of a focus on looking after our land. I think that the majority of farmers would see themselves as a kaitiaki (caretaker or guardian) of the land because, if we don’t look after it and keep it clean and weed-free and maximise it, we wouldn’t be able to produce well to pay our bills, and if we didn’t pay our bills or our mortgage, then we would lose the land, our home, and our children’s homes. So, I would say, whilst I was brought up to think about this in a very production-oriented way, there was a strong sense of the importance of looking after the land. If you don’t put the effluent from the cowshed back onto the paddock, instead of letting it go down the drain, there’s a loss, both economically and of fertility of the land. In those days, the thinking wouldn’t have gone any further to the idea of “this is polluting the stream”. Then, the pollution to our environment wouldn’t have been recognised because at that stage its impact, the quantities, and the accumulative effect wasn’t so obvious, as it wasn’t from the city into the Waitemata harbour.

Keith: That’s interesting. It’s a different mindset: short-term profit and loss rather than long-term sustainability.

Colin: It was simply understood as a loss of nutrients, and then as a loss in terms of dollars and cents: a loss of fertility, a certain loss of pride, future loss of production, and a poorer financial future.

Keith: So, does thinking about yourself as a kaitiaki of the land/whenua represent a shift in your thinking?

Colin: It's not a term I would have used back then (in the 1960s and '70s), but I use it now for describing what and how I — and, I think, many others — think about farming. I think it's a word and a concept that refers to a value system which is based on guardianship and care.

I get troubled when I see farmers under attack for not caring. Of course, there are some farmers who don't care and who are neglectful — as there are people who live in town, who are parents, who work in industry, and, dare I say it, in the therapy industry. Farmers don't go into farming in order to abuse animals; they go into farming because they like animals and they like farming, and they value their own industriousness. In my view, what happens in the majority of such cases is that farmers become overloaded; environmental and socio-economic factors change their situation, and they become stressed; their functioning breaks down in some way, and it's then that they neglect or fail to protect their animals. There's nothing about a skinny undernourished animal that puts money in a farmer's bank account, pays his mortgage, or makes a profit. The Crafar farms experience (see Nippert, 2015) is a classic example of where it was portrayed as the abuse of animals, but the tragedy of it was that it was the effect of a breakdown of management and the management of their staff. What the mainstream press generally fails to portray, whether it be a report on animal cruelty in town or down on the farm, is that, for every animal cruelty story, behind it, there is a tragic human life story — and that's what I think the press, the public, and the environmental lobby fail to recognise or publicise. The tragedy is that somebody gets to that point where their personal functioning breaks down. When does a farmer drive past an animal and just not see it anymore? When they're in a high state of stress breakdown, when there is a tragic loss of human functioning beyond their own basic code as a farmer. Then corresponding in a loss of animals' lives, and a human potentially taking their life.

Therapy

Keith: Thanks for sharing your thoughts — and passion — about this. Perhaps we might turn to the background of what brought you into the world of therapy?

Colin: During those last couple of years of farming in the early '90s, one of my sons started stealing and so my wife and I took him to therapy; we ended up doing family therapy with two therapists, during which they looked at me and said "Oh, you need some assistance". I agreed and went into individual therapy, which I did for about nine months, and then joined and participated in a series of personal development groups, which happened to be psychodrama groups. I did a number of those over probably a year or year and a half, and then went on to train in the psychodramatic method.

Keith: So your first experience of therapy was as a client. When we met previously (to this interview), this was one of the things we discussed: that for you back then (and for me before I first trained as a therapist in the mid 1980s), most of us were in training

because we had been clients (and still were) and had experienced the benefits of personal therapy. I think this is significant, and represents a different relationship with therapy and education/training than those trainees who only do therapy because it's a training requirement. So, what was it in your own therapy that made you consider that this was something you wanted to offer?

Colin: It was my own experience of the therapist I saw in Whangarei, Kerry O'Callaghan. There was an immediate effect and ease from processing something which I never would have had the language for, or understood. I remember driving up there from Waipu (a 50-minute drive) so furious that my hands were frozen on the steering wheel, locked with rage. In terms of therapeutic work, it only went so far because I only stuck with it for nine months and thought that I was complete. Nevertheless, I was also impressed with the insights I had after leaving therapy, and, even four years later, there were still insights going off in my mind, "Oh, that's what he meant ...", and that's what really convinced me that therapy was good value. Back then, I wouldn't have even known what "counselling" meant, but it was the insights and changes made and the experiences of being in psychodrama groups run by Rosie Gould where I found there was a place that I belonged — there was a belonging, no matter what your craziness was. And seeing the experience and productivity that came out of those sessions and groups: getting to experience being an anorexic's stomach, a pet pig, or the third person in a flatmate's love triangle.

Keith: So you had a sense of belonging ...

Colin: ... yes, and that's the meaning of Moreno's (1977) concept of the social placenta: the centre of belonging and an individual's place of belonging.

Keith: Thanks for making that connection there.

The second thing I wanted to ask about your transition from client to trainee/student was about you finding a new interest and skills.

Colin: Yeah, being told I was a good protagonist and auxiliary, feeling like I had something to offer, and also being promoted, and then making the decision to train as a psychodramatist. I didn't know where on earth I was going to go after I sold the farm, and had lost everything, so the counselling and therapy began to open doors, and then came the training. Rosie, who was running it then, set up a training group in Whangarei and I joined that. By then I was divorced but still living on the farm, waiting for it to sell. So I felt like I was this farmer amongst this group of therapists. Then, after the farm sold, it felt like there was a head-shift for me, by which I mean that I moved out of one world into another.

Then I moved to Auckland and did my initial training with the Central Institute of Technology, in an alcohol and drug training programme (1993-1994). At the same time, I did a counselling practicum at Human Development & Training Institute, and psychodrama training with the Auckland Psychodrama Training Centre, which I completed in 2012. During 1991-1992, I ran stopping violence programmes at Friendship House in Manukau, South Auckland, and was one of the five initial staff that set up the adolescent sex offender programme in Auckland. From 1992 to 1996 I was employed as a counsellor at 393 Great North Road, which was a Methadone Treatment Programme. Following this, I worked at the Community

Alcohol and Drugs Service for five years, during which time I was also part of the Anger Change Trust, set up by Fay Lillian. By then, I had also started a small private practice. I also contracted to Waitakere Abuse and Trauma Counselling Service (WATCS), the women's sexual abuse clinic, to work as a family therapist and, as part of that, I started working with children; later, I also did contract work with the SAFE adult offenders treatment programme.

Taking a Stand

Keith: Wow! That's quite a CV, and brings us nicely to a significant aspect of your working life as a psychodramatist and a psychotherapist, which is working with difficult people and, in your case, men and boys who are violent and sexually offending. Again, from reading your thesis, I am interested in your thoughts about the use of holding you discussed in that work. Was this controversial at the time?

Colin: It certainly was for me, in that I was taught in training that you don't touch in therapy, other than in the psychodrama setting, which is a group setting where there's clearly a whole interactive process which includes touch and holding.

One particular incident stands out. I was working with a kid in my private practice room. I said something to him and stepped slightly towards him, in response to which, he did a complete backwards somersault, turned twice and put his arms straight through the plate glass window. The whole lot crashed and shattered. Then he went to get a bit of glass to cut himself, at which point I restrained him. I used restraint with him and with a number of other boys in order to contain them physically, which meant I had to cross that barrier about touch in the therapy room. This was made more complex by the fact that I was working with boys who had been abused and some of whom were highly sexualised (they would try to grope you or suck your toes, or even threaten to rape me). I discussed this — to touch or not to touch, to restrain or not to restrain — extensively in supervision with Jonathan (Fay), who was incredibly helpful, but there was a sense in which touching and holding was taboo and wasn't talked about publicly.

Keith: You titled your thesis *Taking a Stand in the Therapeutic Relationship* and I wonder how much, by writing about your use of holding, you wanted to put this on the agenda, or to make it public?

Colin: I don't know if I stood for it as such, as in "This needs to happen", but I certainly knew that I had to do it as part of the therapy. Of course, there were some kids that never needed restraining, and others who were clearly high risk if I didn't intervene physically. It was quite a challenging time really: to step outside what I thought, and most colleagues would think was the norm, especially in the context and the privacy of private practice, in which there is higher degree of risk of complaint or allegation. Of course, I did what I could to protect myself and my clients, like ensuring that I saw them when there were others in the building. Also, I think that men working in this field carry quite a different element of projection than women do, an element that I think stops or discourages younger males coming into the therapy profession, and going to become teachers or trainers.

Keith: Yes, I wonder if words such as “holding”, “restraining”, and “intervening physically” are better and more accurate descriptions of what we may need to do at times and with some clients, than the word “touch”. As we know, some therapists have touched clients inappropriately, so our concerns are well-founded. At the same time, the fear of being accused of inappropriate touch has, I think, led to a defensive therapy, and a general absence of discussion about the use as well as the abuse of touch. I rather like what Older (1982) wrote about this: “Touching is not a technique: Not-touching is a technique” (p. 203). I think the accurate use of language is important to describe the literal and symbolic, especially as it sounds as if you yourself felt “held”, metaphorically and symbolically, by having a supportive supervisor.

Colin: Yes, incredibly, and especially by Jonathan in that process: he really backed me. I also had other colleagues who supported me and I was surrounded by teams, both at WATCS and SAFE.

Keith: I’m glad about that.

So I get a sense that your way of taking a stand is both personal and quite quiet. I think you cited Evan (Sherrard) as encouraging you to take courage, to dare to be yourself and so on, to dare to do this work. This phrase was clearly central enough to you to make it the title of your thesis. How important is “taking a stand” or, perhaps, “standing your ground” to you now?

Colin: It was incredibly important through that process of developing the capacity as a psychodrama director; and it’s a term that I have often used in my life, so it’s important to me on a personal level too; there have been many times in my life that boundaries have been crossed, when left unchallenged it has usually been to my detriment. So, yes, I would say it was crucial. I absolutely believed in the psychotherapeutic and psychodramatic process, worked it, and lived it. I think this was particularly important in the work I did with offenders. I believed that I’d reap the benefit of it in my life, and I believed that my clients would reap the benefit of me being willing to take a stand — as any good parent would with the response of an overdeveloped autonomous child that puts him or herself or others in harm’s way. Now, I’m not so sure. Now, at times, I make the choice of letting them reap the consequences of their own behaviours — elsewhere. I guess I’m a bit tired and that weaves into being an aging therapist. I think I’m more introspective, more focused on asking myself what’s the value of me, what is the value of therapy, and what do I believe now compared to what I believed when I was I writing about taking a stand?

Keith: I appreciate your introspection — which, of course, in this context, invites others to introspect, to inspect and/or reflect on these questions, too. Let’s come back to that.

Psychotherapy and Farming

Keith: Having discussed both your background and interest in farming and something of your journey in becoming a psychodramatist and psychotherapist, I wonder about how — or whether — you put the two together? You talked earlier about the influence of farming on your theoretical understanding, especially of groups, and

with some passion about the plight of some farmers. Do you work therapeutically with farmers?

Colin: Certainly, in my work in recent years. In my earlier years of owning — when I had the Waipu farm — I wasn't in therapy. In the last 13 or 14 years, I've had the farm in Paparoa. A big part of the therapeutic work I do now, is succession-planning with farmers and their families especially with regard to large farms, assisting them with transitioning from one generation to another.

For a long time, I chose to maintain my respective privacies: I kept my two occupations totally separate, and didn't let people up in Paparoa know that I was a therapist. A number of people would refer to me as “that psychologist guy up the road” (and they wouldn't know the difference between a psychologist and a psychotherapist), but, also, for me, I wanted to be anonymous because of the high-risk clients I worked with: the sex offenders and the forensic work. I also felt that by making my psychotherapy history more public in the rural sector, I risked some cynicism from the farming community, and by making my rural life more overt in the therapy world, I risked envy from people in Auckland, both from colleagues and clients. Many colleagues admired my ability to hold these two worlds effectively. When I wasn't working as a therapist, I just wanted to be a farmer. That's how I kept myself balanced. During the writing of my thesis, there was a point where I did start to amalgamate my separate worlds, and I started working in Maungataroto with a small practice.

Farmers are notorious for not coming forward for therapy. They're “do-it-yourself” guys, and not known for talking. In a sense, they're encrypted by the nature of the work and in their isolation to remain internal: they're out there talking to the fence-post or the dog. They're on their own. They might be on a thousand acres and their isolation is acute, and so they don't know how to talk to others. At meetings or discussion groups about farming, their talking is still very production-oriented; they actually say very little, and are not relational. Also, it's a very critical culture (“Well, look at that grass”, “I wouldn't do it that way”), and they tend not to value each other.

However, in the past couple of years, I have been integrating these two worlds as I have been working with Coach Approach Rural, an organisation that specialises in succession-planning and mentoring for the rural sector. This work, mostly with families, focuses on future-focused planning, so it's basically family therapy and groupwork: working with families, assisting them to transition farms from one generation to another. From that, I do get individual work, but, generally, farmers will warm up more to the idea of coaching and mentoring, than to therapy or psychotherapy.

Keith: So some of the coaching and family work you do is about changing that culture; in transactional analysis terms, challenging the Critical Parent.

Colin: Yeah, and the challenge is how to get them to engage with changing those beliefs, especially of that harsh and hunkered-down way of being. I've worked with a few guys who've gone bankrupt and they're pretty hard to keep engaged because they have a huge sense of failure and are deeply ashamed. I remember one guy who was

referred to me for therapy, he came and brought his son. On the one hand, it was good that he identified his boy's need; on the other hand, I believe that he was avoiding the core grief and loss associated with the sense of failure he was experiencing. In fact, it was the son who was carrying the sense of failure and, indeed, suicidal ideation, because he thought that he had let his father down, causing the bankruptcy. From my perspective, the father was so vulnerable that he wasn't able to warm up to his own process. By and large, it's very difficult to get farmers to engage, let alone to get them to be able to take on board a psychodynamic formulation.

Keith: That's a poignant story, Colin. Can you give us an example of the family work you do on succession-planning?

Colin: Yeah. I've been working with a farming family. The other day there was this lovely session that I held between the two older members of the family: the mother and father, with their wish to hand the farm to their son and daughter-in-law. Their wish is to have the son pick up the process and take the lead; for their part, the son and daughter-in-law were waiting for the cues from the older generation to take this up. I worked with them for a couple of hours and then said to the parents: "You have to hand it over; and you have to let them know that it's okay that they take over ... they feel guilty about displacing you". Then, all of a sudden, the experience in the room between the two couples levelled out. There was this lovely moment where the tension melted and the family came together. The daughter-in-law then came to the realisation she could move into the homestead and the parents realised they could move to a smaller block. It was a really enjoyable and satisfying experience. Another family I worked with had difficult relations between the siblings. There was a deep wound between the father and the daughter; the daughter had come back onto the farm to work for some years and then left. Because of the conflict between father and daughter, the daughter withdrew into depression and avoidance. The parents favourably endowed the daughter, who appeared paralysed, an endowment that produced envy and loss in the sons, which, in turn created an envy and a loss between the daughter and her brothers. The family brought me in to work with them. The progress about succession was severely hindered by the unresolved family conflict. In this case, I worked with the parents first and encouraged them to announce to the kids: "We need to transition this huge property and/or equity in some way, and we want to know what roles you'll take". Generally, there'll be a range of family conflict-resolution sessions in order to heal rifts, to find out what each member of the family wants, and then to set in place tasks for each and all in order to transition the farm over to the next generation.

Keith: I'm so glad that you're doing the work and that these clients have you, with your experience and skills. Have you ever taken this into outdoor therapy or a form of therapy that might be considered eco-therapy?

Colin: Not eco-therapy as such, but when we were working at SAFE, we did lots of outdoor drama and processing of the boys' various offending, which was therapeutic. We used to take kids away on the adolescent programme. We'd tramp all the Kaimais and all the Central plateau and we did therapy all over the North Island; we tramped

all around Lake Waikaremoana and did dramas out in the bush. We were very privileged to be able to be in a team that was doing that, and we would do it for a week or 10 days and worked our butts off! We came back pretty knackered, but we did a hell of a lot of good. The boys changed after those trips, during the completion stages of treatment: coming out of shame, their emotional and physical stuntedness disappeared, and they started to grow physically again.

Keith: That sounds amazing. Whilst you're not referring to this or your current work specifically as eco-therapy, I would suggest that, given what you've said about the land, farming, and farmers it is informed by ecological and psychological concerns and, therefore, might be thought of as a therapy and coaching informed by ecopsychology.

Your experiences and stories of farming and psychotherapy have provided an interesting foundation for the second half of our conversation in which I'd like to pick up on three themes which have emerged, on ageing, sustaining professional development, and succession-planning.

Ageing

Keith: Your work with farmers and farming families on succession-planning is also dealing with ageing and a "natural order" of things where one generation grows old and, before passing on, wants (and, of course sometimes doesn't want) to pass things on. So, I'd be interested in your thoughts about ageing, both in farming and in the psychotherapy community.

Colin: Yeah. I have seen a number of my colleagues who were strong peers, fading out in some way. I can think of three who are still practicing really strongly, seeing a lot of clients, doing effective work, and feeling good about it, one of which has certainly had a new lease of life. Then I've seen a range of other peers who are fading out: seeing fewer clients, and feeling fatigued, levels of cynicism, disenchanted, and discoloured. I'm seeing a watering down of values and beliefs, and, like the setting sun, that these colleagues are losing their brightness: they have less colour, less definition of living, and less wish to intervene ...

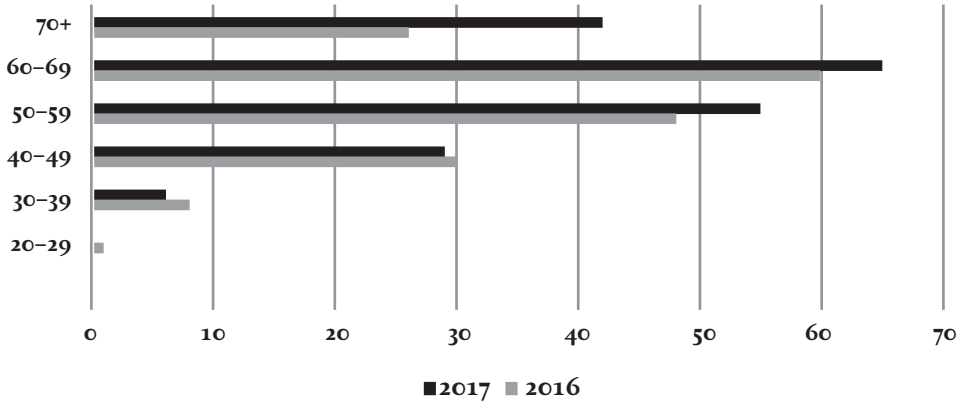
Keith: ... and perhaps less willingness or energy to take a stand, perhaps?

Colin: Yes — and, of course, some of these colleagues are emerging into a life-stage where they need to earn less, and want to spend less time with clients and more time with their families, perhaps providing more backup to their grown-up children who are raising their own children. Also, I think we need to ask about the accumulative impact on a psychotherapist of having been exposed to so many tragic human life stories; navigating our way through someone's deviant sexual fantasies; holding and absorbing the content of the many stories of grossly abused children. Whilst knowing the person in the room is new and unique, the themes and stories of human neglect and abuse continue.

Keith: I agree that these are important questions. I also think that this has organisational implications. I would suggest that the average age of the members of the NZAP is relatively high/old, and I don't see so many young people joining the Association.

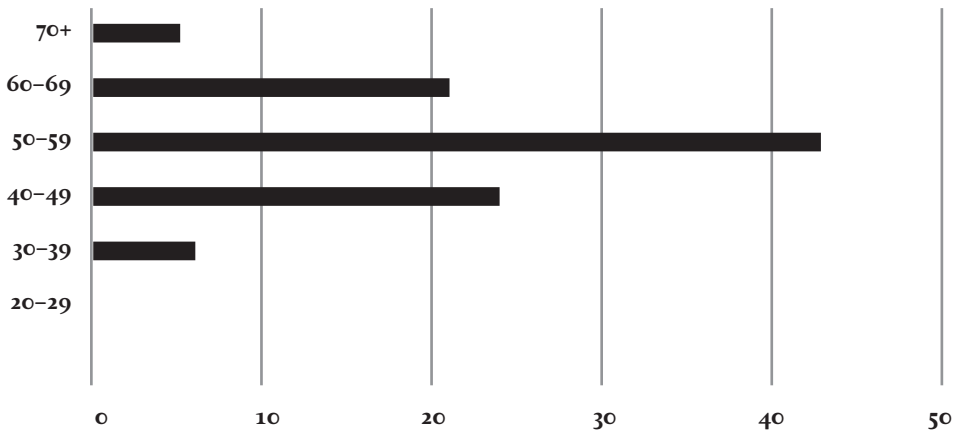
I was curious about this and so asked Nikky Winchester, the Executive Officer of the NZAP to provide me with some figures, which she did (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. MEMBERSHIP OF THE NZAP BY AGE



As these figures are based on 31.8% and 41.9% of the membership (for 2016 and 2017, respectively), they are likely to be quite reflective of the overall picture. Nikky also provided me with figures for members who have joined over the past years (based on a 46% sample) (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. NEW MEMBERS OF THE NZAP, 2007-2017 BY AGE



What do you make of this?

Colin: I'm not sure that I know yet. There is a lot of grey hair in NZAP now. I do, however, see a parallel in the farming community. The average age of the New Zealand farmer is 65 years old. So when I go to a discussion group or a meeting and it's all grey hair — or no hair and skin cancers. I see a similar phenomenon in the therapy community, and particularly in the psychodrama community, where there just aren't people coming through: the numbers in training have fallen away. On the rare occasions I go to NZAP meetings, my peers are not there anymore. A number of them have moved out of Auckland and they don't come out at night and travel.

Also, there are a range of people who I've seen move from holding a strong psychodynamic way of viewing life and the world, into more of a coaching role, which is more focusing on here-and-now behaviour, role training and role development, using methodologies avoidant of the emotional. They appear less interested in holding and working with the transference, inviting the progression down through the developmental stages and then the reparative rebuilding.

I notice I don't have enough connection now with those people, we don't get to know how each are working or what each is holding, and there's a loneliness in it — certainly for me and perhaps for them. Where do people go? Is there life after therapy? One of the reasons why I got into therapy was that I believed I could do it into my ripe old age. When I looked around at Evan (Sherrard), Max (Clayton), Don (Reekie) and all of those people, there they were: Evan worked into his late 70s. At a similar age, Max was still running five-day training groups of 25 people up to his death at 78 yrs. So the capacity to carry on, and the respect and the wisdom that comes with age is there. What is it that kept these men alive, producing good work, effective in their performance, working with integrity and capacity?

At the same time, over the years, I have seen too many of my colleagues implode into various cancers, developing immune deficiency syndromes and psychosomatic illnesses, and putting on weight. One of the things I thought about for quite a while was watching the changing shape of therapists' bodies, and how they went from trim, slim, healthy, vibrant-looking bodies to ones that were fatter, wider and more sluggish. There was a period where about ten of my colleagues between here and Australia went down with cancer and I'm going, "Bloody hell, what is it that people are internalising?" Therapy is a very sedentary job, and, in order to be fully in relationship with people, we have to internalise. An important question for the profession is, "How do we do this without our bodies becoming sick?"

Sustaining Professional Development

Keith: So, this might a good moment to ask you how you sustain yourself, especially in the context of ageing?

Colin: Well, I've certainly not broken out in cancer. I've had my times where I was fearful of it, but I think that part of the reason I have survived is because I've had the farm to excrete: to get out and physically discharge that energy and be right away from the emotional toxicity.

I remember years ago being at a conference on sex offenders at which a Māori woman from the East Coast got up and started talking about “colour therapy”. Two of my peers, a forensic psychologist and a drama therapist are rolling their eyes and scoffing, and I’m wondering where this is going. She talks about having these men in this treatment programme, out there in the East Cape with the blue of the sky, and the green of the grass and bush, and talking about the healing that’s associated with being with and in the elements. Suddenly, I’m thinking, “This all makes sense to me”, and I’m making a link to my own experience of being out on the farm. One of the reasons I think I’ve remained healthy in that way was and is that I was and am out there in the elements, and right away from my treatment work, especially when I was working with offenders.

Keith: What a lovely story. I was thinking about the image of the land being sustaining for you, and you being part of sustaining the land, the physical ground on which you — and others — stand. I had a strong image of standing alongside you and looking out over that land, your farm, perhaps, and then, rather like a film director panning across to another landscape, turning my head to the land(scape) of the psychotherapy world. I wonder whether you and others, including me, feel sustained by that ground, that community — and, if we don’t, whether that’s a problem, and maybe even more of a problem for ageing therapists.

Colin: Yeah, on all sorts of levels ...

Keith ... from micro matters like having Branch meetings not always in evenings, to macro issues of succession-planning. How do we help those 70- and 80-year-olds pass on the baton in a way that is sustainable to the community, and in a way that they feel sustained? How might we acknowledge elders, such as farewellling retiring members? How do we honour the elders but also encourage them to step aside, and to let the next generation come through? How might we support those elders to leave and let go, and support those who want to stay (e.g., to come to meetings and conferences), without them feeling they need to present or give speeches?

Colin: Yeah. For myself, emotionally, I’m really enjoying the two days of work I have down here (in Auckland) doing therapy; I love being with the team I work with (a group of young, holistically-focused physiotherapists and acupuncturists). At the same time, in my heart, I’d also like to be up there (on the farm).

There was something I wanted to add also about how the wisdom gets handed on. I had a conversation last night with Stefan Nagler about how much we keep our therapy life alive, and missing that element of supervision groups and the personal development that came with it. Stefan and I ran a men’s therapy group for seven years, as a consequence of which we got a lot of emotional nurturing from that process, from each other but also from the other guys and being auxiliaries in their dramas or directing the dramas; when you’re directing the drama you’re also affected by it. Part of the psychodramatic technique is that there is a sharing at the end, and this has a levelling component that brings the group back to a collective, and individual auxiliary members or the director gets to share something of an element of their own personal process, which “cleanses”, for want of a better term, or adds it back to the group, so that protagonists’ “pathological uniqueness” is not

left carried by the protagonist alone.

Keith: I agree that groups can be very sustaining and wonder if, as we get older, and our friendship circles and professional networks get smaller, so the sense of being sustained by these diminishes. I think this issue of sustainability is really important. I recently came across a lovely passage in a review written by Herbert Hahn, himself now something of an elder statesman. In it, he commented that: “In following current trends and nailing the challenging flag of ‘continuing professional development’ to our mast, we perhaps need to give serious and careful consideration to what best sustains, as well as develops psychotherapists” (Hahn, 2004, pp. 539-540). I think the shift from continuing to sustaining professional development is a significant one and one that might become more important in the light of some of the points we are making and discussing here.

Colin: I agree. I consider it cruel when any culture excludes people, and, given that, for me at least, the essence of therapy is about the right to belong, I find it particularly cruel that an aspect of our therapy culture excludes colleagues. What do we, as clinicians, work with? Mostly we work with people who are socially isolated in some way and want to belong — within their family, or within their relationships. We work with all these kids that are marginalised, we’re working to bring them in, and we’re challenging them to bring themselves in. So, for me, it’s an odd thing that exclusion occurs, and within a range of therapeutic organisations — and where the inclusion/exclusion dynamic within the organisation is rife. I find the exclusion and discarding of the elderly quite sad, and quite difficult: “Off to a retirement home now”. When do we value the aged wisdom? When do we, as ageing therapists, continue to be leaders from our clear years of experience? And, we must also ask: when are we stuck in our rigidity of habit or sameness?

Succession-planning

Keith: So putting this together with the previous discussion, I wonder how much older and ageing therapists and trainers facilitate or, in effect, get in the way of succession-planning in the therapeutic world? How might what you were saying about succession-planning in farming apply to psychotherapy? The last time we met, we talked about our experiences of personal therapy, of psychotherapy training, and about the expectations we — and our trainers — had about personal accountability and doing our own personal work in relation to the training journey ...

Colin: ... yeah, and how there’s a generational and cultural shift in that expectation in which something has got watered down, with the result that the next generation doesn’t have the same kind of investment that we had. It seems to me that the people we looked up to had a high degree of commitment to and an ethical integrity in undertaking that personal development, and we looked up to them partly because of that — and that the next generation doesn’t look to us in the same way.

Keith: Why do you think that is?

Colin: I think it’s partly a shift in the culture, values and expectations (as I referred to earlier), both in and outside psychotherapy, and, in my view, a general watering

down of these expectations; for instance, regarding students undertaking their own therapy, and maintaining a commitment to understanding themselves in the context of group process, as well as greater economic pressures.

Also, if today's trainees aren't looking up to us, this also means that we haven't got people in a positive transference to us. Part of the transference/counter-transference process, and especially the positive idealisation, is how we get resourced as therapists, supervisors, and trainers — and if we don't get fuelled by their energy or passion, then we, in turn, are perhaps less able to generate it. This may be partly about ageing and role fatigue but, nevertheless, I think it's an issue and I think there's a dilemma for me, and perhaps our generation, to call this next entitled generation to account. Do I have the right to call my supervisees to account on this? Well, yes I do, but am I backed on that by the profession, our policies, and systems? I don't believe we are.

Keith: There's a lot to pick up in what you say. I'm interested in the relationship between personal therapy and training (which we've touched on); and in the ageing and greying of the profession. I'm struck by the image of the older generation drifting away not only because they don't have anyone to look up to, but also because they've got nobody looking up to them.

Where I agree with what you say is that, as you get more senior and hold senior positions, say as a trainer, you do get the benefit of the positive transference, 'though this is also balanced by the negative! Some professional associations (such as psychodrama and transactional analysis) have a teaching and supervising membership, which may create a subtle or not so subtle hierarchy. Interestingly, in countries in which there are large numbers of transactional analysts, some senior clinicians have argued for having an equivalent senior status for practitioners.

However, I have to say I am quite sceptical about this emphasis on the vertical, and critical of the reliance on the metaphor of the vertical transference. I have discussed this — and the additional concept of horizontal transference elsewhere (see Tudor, 2014/2017). I think the over-emphasis on the vertical is based on an outdated parent-child metaphor, which is inappropriate for the training — or, better, the education — of adult students of psychotherapy, and encourages an unhelpful and quite often unhealthy dependency on the trainer and supervisor. What's wrong with older practitioners looking — not down, but across — to younger colleagues for supervision? I have supervisors and consultants who are both older and younger than I am. I think there's a danger of generalising and reifying the wisdom of elders, when there's a lot of knowledge and wisdom in youth. I think many of us older and senior colleagues could learn a lot from much younger colleagues.

Colin: Yeah, and I would say that doing this is less about age and more about the maturity of their thinking, behaviour, decision-making, and their facilitation. The older person would have to trust the "inexperience" of the younger colleague, I hand this level of trust over to my sons easily and fully. How do I do that to and with a younger peer? Perhaps by developing my admiration of them, authentically listening to

them, and being prepared to give up my wish for statesmanship? For me it's more about their quality than their age or eldership. If we have or are proposing that colleagues develop a positive transference towards a younger supervisor, perhaps we might think of this as an *inverse* transference?

Keith: I agree. I think that's quite a challenge for our elders and will be for us as we age, and for our professional organisations as their members age — and so we come back to age. In acknowledging that, I have become aware of time — which, in the context of this written article, translates into being aware of its length — and so, it's time to draw this to a close.

Given the reflective nature and tone of our conversation, as well as some of the content, it is perhaps appropriate that we close on a reflective, and slightly subdued note. Nonetheless, I am most grateful to you, Colin, for this *kōrero*, and all your thoughts and reflections, your insights and outwards. Thank you for sharing so much with me — and us. *Ngā mihi nui, rangatira.*

References

- Dalziel, P. (1989). The economic summit: What people were thinking. In B. Easton (Ed.), *The making of Rogernomics* (pp. 53-67). Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand: Auckland University Press.
- Douglas, R. (1980). *There's got to be a better way*. Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand: Fourth Estate Books.
- Hahn, H. (2004). F***ing, failing and finding out. [Review of the book *Disgrace*, by J. M. Coetzee]. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 18, 537-542.
- Moreno, J. L. (1977). *Psychodrama* (Vol. 1; 4th ed.). Beacon, NY: Beacon House.
- Nippert, M. (2015, December 21). The big read: Crifar farms saga over. *New Zealand Herald*. Retrieved from http://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11564446
- Older, J. (1982). *Touching is healing: A revolutionary breakthrough in medicine*. New York, NY: Stein and Day.
- Sherrard, E. (2017). *The book of Evan: The life and work of Evan McAra Sherrard* (K. Tudor, Ed.) Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand: Resource Books.
- Tudor, K. (2017). The relational, the vertical, and the horizontal: A critique of “relational depth”. In *Conscience and critic: The selected works of Keith Tudor* (pp. 191-201). London, UK: Routledge. (Original work published [in German] 2014)
- Wrennall, C. (2012). *Taking a stand in a therapeutic relationship*. Psychodrama thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements toward certification as a Practitioner by the Board of Examiners of the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Psychodrama Association Incorporated, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Wrennall, C. (2017). A day on the farm with Evan. In K. Tudor (Ed.), *The book of Evan: The life and work of Evan McAra Sherrard* (pp. 43-44). Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand: Resource Books.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Evan Sherrard for bringing us together; to Nikki Winchester, the Executive Officer at the NZAP, for the statistics on the age of NZAP members; and to the two reviewers for their feedback and comments on an earlier draft of the article.



Colin Wrennall is a father, grandfather, farmer, registered psychotherapist, psychodramatist, family therapist, and rural organisational consultant. He is a lover of animals, fishing, and the outdoors, and of integrity and industriousness. Contact details: colin@aurora-psychotherapy.co.nz .

Keith Tudor is Professor of Psychotherapy and Head of the School of Public Health & Psychosocial Studies at Auckland University of Technology. He is a Certified and a Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst, the co-editor of *Ata* and the editor of *Psychotherapy and Politics International*. Contact details: k.tudor@aut.ac.nz .