Closing the Distance on Belonging to a Cause

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ABSTRACT *Causes are trendy stuff these days. There are badges, ribbons, groups on networking sites, magazines, dedicated shops and even a travel industry all working towards selling the idea of a worthy cause. But what is it that we are actually buying into? Is it the cause itself and the idea of bettering our society? Or is it a trendy brand badge that we can wave around to claim that we belong to something honourable? Is it both? I wish to present a paper that will attempt an exploration of what it means for somebody to take up a cause, juxtaposing those who do so for the sake of an ideology as against those who do so as a form of social acceptance. I would also like to ask the question 'what does it mean when that somebody is a psychotherapist?' Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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I wasn't born yet in 1968. I am of a generation that by and large knows very little about the events that many have claimed shaped the generations that followed. However, I figure that what I do know is that it definitely did have an impact. I know this because the events in 1968 are still being spoken of around the world, such as here today at the 'Psychotherapy and Liberation May 68 Conference'. This conference appears to me as being a celebration of the creation and mobilization of so many different groups of people who united their voices over a plethora of issues, some of which are still being debated and are of relevance to this day. It also seems to me to be a conference whose attendees are united in wanting to have a say in the shape and development of the world at large.

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But is that what the attendees of today are actually here for? Are we all here today in order to make a difference and commit ourselves to a worthy cause? In 1968 people were united because of the causes they believed in. They took the courage to stand behind their beliefs and place them firmly into the public arena. Are we prepared to do the same? *Should* we do the same? Are the issues that defined the day reflective of the worthy causes of today? Who defines the worthy causes of today? What makes a cause such that people define it as being worthy of support?

Unfortunately, some of these questions are beyond the scope of what can hope to be explored today. With that in mind, however, I am going to attempt to focus on the people who join these causes in order to feel like they belong to something, and those people who believe in addressing a problem or issue and in doing so attempt to change society.

THE WORTHY CAUSE

Causes themselves have become somewhat trendy of late. If you go onto some of the social networking sites around on the Internet you are able to find people willing to support any number of causes ranging from stopping world hunger to making St George's Day a public holiday. It is now possible to give toilets and goats as Christmas and birthday presents. The character Joe Connor in the movie *Shooting Dogs* claimed he went to Rwanda to 'star in [his] own Oxfam advert' (Caton-Jones, 2005). These days there are a number of ethical travel firms ready to assist anyone wishing to do the same.

What is it that is being bought into though? As more NGOs are established and are competing for the resources that are inevitably required to sustain them, there has been a trend to establish a specific recognized brand to attach to the cause. The creation of this kind of charitable corporate branding has had a number of effects, the most notable of which being that of the question of brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is a well documented phenomenon that has been used by corporate giants ranging from Coca-Cola to McDonalds. It is also something that has been useful for many charitable organizations such as Amnesty and Oxfam. The promotion of charitable causes within a branding culture opens up a multitude of funding opportunities. Gail Wasserman, the vice-president of American Express, gives some idea of this when she states 'American Express did its market research before joining the Red partnership. There are 1.5 million conscience-consumers in the UK who make decisions about brands based on social and ethical values – it is an audience with increased affluence who can choose where and how they spend their money. The market is currently worth £4 billion annually and is growing' (http://www.brandchannel.com/features_effect.asp?pf_id=337, accessed 8 November 2008). Four billion is a lot of conscience.

Adam Curtis, in his 2002 documentary series *The Century of the Self* (Curtis, 2002) argued that the rise in the individualist tendencies of the West had a lot to do with the rise of advertising. He outlined how psychoanalytic ideas entered the mainstream in the US thanks to characters such as Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud. Edward Bernays took Freud's ideas and used them to change the way advertisers promoted their products. Instead of focusing on selling a product through an advertisement based on the item being a need of the consumer, Bernays changed the way advertising was delivered, and focused on selling the products based on the wants of consumers. Bernays did this through a combination of the use of focus groups combined with Freud's ideas concerning

the unconscious. Curtis argued that this led to advertisements promoting ways in which to satisfy our desires, together with a new and now unlimited possibility as to the kinds of things we might desire, and a broader range of what is desirous in itself. Advertising campaigns changed from merely selling an item for consumption, to selling a lifestyle, image or belief for consumption. It became the case whereby if you bought that item you were then deemed to be living a certain lifestyle. Throw in celebrity endorsements and the branding age was born.

But what happens when people start to buy into the brand rather than the cause? Perhaps some of the more recent implications of product branding may be able to help to shed some light on what the future of branded causes might bring.

With people such as Edward Bernays shifting the function of advertising so that it appeals to people's innermost desires, and most notably, the desire of belonging to a group of people who live the lifestyle depicted by brand advertising, it could be argued that the concept of what it means for someone to belong has inadvertently also been changed. For example, let's imagine that you have bought a pair of sneakers because Nike told you to 'just do it'. You chose that pair of sneakers because the advert showed a number of celebrities who you admire who also 'just did it'. So now, because you have bought those sneakers, you have something in common with the celebrities whom you admire. You now belong in the same crowd. Let's now imagine you actually use these sneakers and go out jogging. You meet other joggers. There are a number of other joggers who also 'just did it' and bought Nike sneakers. You now have something in common. That person belongs in the same crowd as you and the celebrities that inspired you to buy the joggers in the first place. Even though you have never uttered a single word to this other jogger (or to the celebrity as well for that matter), you feel like you belong to something, you share something in common – a sneaker lifestyle choice.

If anyone finds this far fetched I urge you to take a closer look at some of the different urban subcultures that have sprung up around the world. Buying into a lifestyle offered by a brand's advertising has had a profound impact on how our society functions. Justin Pillay, Steve Terrett, and Michael Eugene Thomas are but three names in an alarmingly long list of teenagers who have been killed for their specifically branded shoes (see http://www.news24.com/News24/South_Africa/News/0,,2-7-1442_1553684,00.html, accessed 8 November 2008; http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-8511855_ITM, accessed 8 November 2008; http://chucksconnection.com/articles/ConverseArt08.html, accessed 8 November 2008). These startling examples represent the degree that people have gone to in coveting branded items. One could argue this is no more than a modern version of tribal belonging. If you think this only happens in the States you are mistaken. Here in London it is unfortunately currently the case that some of our youngsters can be beaten or even killed for being in the wrong postcode area (private communication from S. Westcott, Team Manager, Haringey Young People's Counselling Service, 2008).

What this possibly does, however, is create a kind of illusion of belonging to something. It places an impersonal distance between you and what it is you are belonging to. Many assumptions can now be made concerning another individual. The feeling of belonging is created without even having a conversation with another person to see if there are any shared or common views. However, if you are not having a conversation with someone then you are also not engaging with difference. Belonging from afar or in fantasy is even less

likely than normal to have any detractors. This quite possibly has the attraction of being a safer way of belonging.

In his book titled *The True Believer*, Eric Hoffer (2002) describes in a somewhat extreme sense how an individual can sacrifice a sense of self in order to belong to a collective body. He notes 'The fully assimilated individual does not see himself and others as human beings. When asked who he is, his automatic response is that he is a German, a Russian, a Japanese, a Christian, a Moslem, a member of a certain tribe or family. He has no purpose, worth and destiny apart from his collective body; and as long as that body lives he cannot really die.'

So is this what we have got to look forward to with the branding of charitable causes? Does the future hold for us a kind of tribal belonging to causes from a distance without any understanding, dissemination, discussion or debate around the cause to which we purport to lend our support? Is it a form of belonging that no longer recognizes our individualism within that collective?

BELONGING TO A CAUSE

Perhaps we should return here to 1968 for a moment and take a look at what it was that moved people to want to belong to the causes of the day. A lot of the rhetoric of 1968 appealed to a number of people in many different ways but, most of all, it called to people to unite in action to effect change. In 1605 the English lawyer and philosopher Francis Bacon stated that 'the duty and office of rhetoric is to apply reason to imagination for the better moving of the will' (http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/adv2.htm, accessed 8 November 2008). The orators of 1968 would often appeal to an individual's sense of reason with which to describe a problem, and then in so doing call upon the will to action of the individual as a part of a collective group to provide a remedy to the problem. This is something that was certainly not lost on an orator such as Martin Luther King. In his famous speech entitled 'I've Been to the Mountaintop' in April of 1968 he noted the different movements around the world that had been coalescing over various causes and used it to further bolster his own cause by saying 'Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity' (http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/I%27ve_been_to_the_mountaintop.pdf, 8 November 2008). The orators of 1968 were able to narrate a meaning that would touch people in a personal way so they would want to lend their support and thereby 'belong' to the cause in question.

Seventeen years earlier than King's speech, Eric Hoffer outlined that a defining feature of the creation of mass movements is the ability of orators of the day to outline a problem with society as it currently stands and then unite the frustrated with the hope of change. Admittedly he stated this in a somewhat controversial way by claiming that 'The technique of a mass movement aims to infect people with a malady and then offer the movement as a cure' (http://www.erichoffer.net/quotes.html, accessed 8 November 2008). However, he also argues that this is necessary as it is what then inspires individuals to sacrifice themselves to belong to the collective body. He argued that it was the movements that did not do this who would be the most likely to fail in the long run. He believed mass movements are created because 'people

allow themselves to be swept up in larger causes in order to be freed of responsibility for their lives, and to escape the banality or misery of the present' (Hoffer, 2002).

Furthermore, the speeches used to mobilize people to take part in the movements in 1968 invariably appealed to the sense of belonging to something that was bigger than the individual, which was in itself a powerful tool in engaging with disenfranchised people. Similarities can be drawn here as to buying into a brand as a worthy cause today. It could be argued that it is the disenfranchised of today who are the most likely to buy into the idea of a lifestyle provided by a brand. If one was happy and content with life as it stood there would be no desire to change it. In 1968 the most notable appeal of such belonging to something bigger than oneself was that it allowed a whole swathe of people who otherwise felt pretty powerless to feel like they had power and they had a say, that they were important. The purchasing power of an individual today often implies the same sense of importance and is likely to be one of the reasons for the existence of the £4 billion ethical consumer market outlined earlier.

Another characteristic of rhetoric in general is the use of singular expressions to categorize the opponent, oppressor or enemy. For example, the names for a group of collectives such as the government, the state, the communists, the bureaucrats, the bourgeoisie, the counter-revolutionary, the male, are all singular expressions used in language as a means of labelling what essentially amounts to what can often be a very large group of individuals. Drawing on singular expressions in this way is useful in some respects as it allows people a single identity upon which to begin constructing discussion and debate. However, in not having to disseminate the single entity under consideration the orators are essentially free to construct the distancing 'us-and-them' rhetoric, which the continued use of such singular expressions is only likely ever to produce.

By creating this ethereal collective entity such as the government, the state, the police, the educators, the bourgeoisie, it means that pent-up anger and frustration can be vented at symbolic representations of these collective entities such as the Washington monument, the University of Paris at Nanterre, the Sorbonne, branches of McDonalds, rather than the people who make up these collective entities. Now this is wonderful if it transpires that people can hear and understand what are the issues that have caused people to take such an action but more often than not it enters the awareness of the public at large via the media, which will report on the more obvious implications to society such as civil disorder or damage to public property. Dissemination of complex issues takes up valuable media space that could otherwise be used to generate advertising revenue.

It is easy to forget when categorizing collective groups merely under the headings of 'state', 'government', bourgeois, religion, party, feminist movement, psychiatric institute and so forth, that these movements are first and foremost nothing more than collectives of individuals. They are collectives of individuals who have been united by a shared or common belief, or a similar philosophical outlook on life.

Everybody, ranging from the protestor out on the street waving the placard to the policeman trying to uphold civil order and restrain violent demonstrators, to the orator moving the crowds, to the politician in Westminster, to the Janjaweed in Darfur, to the military oppressors in Burma, to the Taleban in Afghanistan, to the President of the United States, everybody, each and every one of them, are all doing what they do in the belief that it is virtuous for them to do it.

We, as practising counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists and psychiatrists, are of course no exception. We would not practise a profession such as psychotherapy if we believed it to be without merit.

Why we do the things we do and a questioning of the basis of human motivation generally has, of course, spawned the career of a great number of philosophers and theoreticians, with an interesting number of results. Alfred Adler believed in 'compensation', that we 'all seek greater power by trying to make up for what we perceive we lacked in childhood' (Butler-Bowden, 2007). Victor Frankl believed that it is our search for meaning that motivates us, claiming that 'Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfilment' (Frankl, 2004). B. F. Skinner defined us as being 'a repertoire of behaviour appropriate to a given set of contingencies' (Butler-Bowden, 2007).

Friedrich Nietzsche believed that we never did anything merely for the sake of doing it, that altruism was a myth. He held in contempt those who considered themselves virtuous, particularly at the expense of others, and mocked them with such phrases as 'And many a one who cannot see the sublime in man calls it virtue that he can see his baseness all-too-closely: thus he calls his evil eye virtue' (Nietzsche, 2003). He was of the opinion that in serving others we are only ever serving ourselves first, and necessarily so.

It is perhaps the lack of ownership of this within ourselves that inspires us to adopt a worthy cause as a means of identifying with an idea of a cause as a lifestyle choice, for as Hoffer notes 'The less justified a man is in claiming excellence for his own self, the more ready is he to claim all excellence for his nation, his religion, his race or his holy cause' (Hoffer, 2002).

One thing all of these theorists and philosophers have in common, however, is that what motivates us to do something is the belief in the meaning of our own actions. Meaning combined with action creates a sense of purpose. Meaning combined with action, combined with a sense of purpose, adopted by a large number of people amounts to a mass movement. Now seems like an excellent point at which to return to the question of us as psychotherapists belonging to a worthy cause, but before doing that, perhaps we should acknowledge that we have so far been looking at those at the more revolutionary end of the political scale. The reality is that this is something that we contend with every day as every single person in a position of power or influence also continually creates such meaning, action and purpose in everything that they do.

FOR THE COMMON GOOD

For example, Adam Curtis, in his 2004 documentary series *The Power of Nightmares*, posited that Paul Wolfowitz, the former US Deputy Secretary of Defense, and the former head of the World Bank was influenced by the ideas of Leo Strauss at university. He put forward that Strauss's ideas on effective government include the notion that a specific fear (courtesy of an exaggerated threat or oppressor, such as communism and Al-Qaeda) must be introduced as a means of uniting the population at large to support that government, to invest in that government the role and responsibility of protecting its citizens against the introduced fear. He then goes on to argue that it is these ideas that have formed American foreign policy at large courtesy of their introduction by Paul Wolfowitz and a number of his associated neo-conservative colleagues such as Donald Rumsfeld (Curtis, 2004). One

could assume that there is a certain safety and self-affirmative gain inherent in surrounding oneself with colleagues with similar beliefs and value systems.

It is situations like this that have led to a new wave of dissent from those modern-day activists who believe this to be a problem. It also represents a shift in what constitutes political activism at large. Earlier we noted how the wearing of a particular brand of clothing could mean that certain assumptions could be made concerning what group an individual belonged to and whether or not you belonged in the same group as that individual. It is not easy to make assumptions about those who are not so explicit about themselves in this way, such as those who are a part of the powerful but less well known Bilderberg Group, a collective of individuals who have positions of influence or power, usually in business, media or politics, who have met at a different location around the world once a year since 1954. A criticism of the group is that it is not in the best interests of the population at large that members of an elite ruling class with controlling interests on the wealth and resources of the planet only associate with others within that elite ruling class (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4290944.stm, accessed 8 November 2008). One assumption that could be made of this group, however, is that the people involved would share similar ideologies concerning the control of vast amounts of the planet's resources, quite possibly at the expense of others, although this is disputed (http://en.wikipedia.org.wiki/Bilderberg).

All of this seems to have been lost on Viscount Etienne Davignon, the current Chair of the Bilderberg Group, who has stated 'I don't think (we are) a global ruling class because I don't think a global ruling class exists. I simply think it's people who have influence interested to speak to other people who have influence' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4290944.stm, accessed 8 November 2008).

The question of what happens when people who have influence only wish to speak to people who have influence does not seem to be of any relevance. If people are not engaged with discussion, debate, and dialogue from various quarters there is an inherent danger of insularization of thought. The consequences of this can but be imagined when the person in question is responsible for making decisions that affect millions or even billions of people.

But what does all of this have to do with us as practising psychotherapists? Surely it is the case that we have nothing in common with these people who appear to be in such phenomenal positions of power?

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND THE COMMON GOOD

Although describing feminist politics in her essay 'Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution', in 1970 Kate Millett wrote: 'When one group rules another, the relationship between the two is political. When such an arrangement is carried out over a long period of time it develops an ideology . . .' (Albert and Albert, 1984). Psychotherapists most certainly do not rule their clients; however, the inherent power imbalance within the therapeutic relationship has been well documented. Bearing in mind Millett's words, the power imbalance in the relationship could most certainly render it political. A history of more than a century would most definitely count it as ideological. Whilst we may not have power over the planet's resources, we more often than not can have a major influence on how people think and feel.

It seems we possibly have more in common with these individuals in positions of power and influence than perhaps was first thought.

It is at this point that we must now finally turn to the question of what it means when a person adopting a worthy cause is a psychotherapist.

As noted earlier, individuals have their own belief systems as to what constitutes the good for society as a whole. Hence, the act of practising psychotherapy over another form of treatment is a political statement in that it declares a belief in what works in treating some of society's dis-ease or ills. The belief and adoption of an ideology in practice such as that of Freud, Jung, Klein, Rogers or Clarkson is making a political statement. In many respects it also makes us no more than modern missionaries who spawn our respective ideologies in the hope of bettering society in the shape of our own image. We do this either implicitly or explicitly with our clients. This is political.

When a psychotherapist has a degree of power or influence over the choices that are made concerning collectives of individuals, or whole swathes of the population, then that is undeniably political. Who are the psychotherapists of today surrounding themselves with? Are they surrounded by only certain colleagues with similar ideologies? Are they seeking out the safety of belonging to a tribal group that shuns difference? Are they branding themselves as being a part of a worthy cause merely because they practice psychotherapy but still not really engaging with the wider implications of what that actually means? What happens when a psychotherapist in a position of power or influence only wishes to engage with other psychotherapists in similar positions of power or influence? What happens when a psychotherapist is deemed to be an expert in the field of mental health and has the ear of Lord Layard?

If we constantly persist in leaving a few people at the top to make decisions without any engagement ourselves with the decisions being made the only likely long-term outcome is an alienation of a large number of people in society. The mistake in political thought today is that the onus of engagement lies solely with those making the decisions. It is ultimately also up to those of us who wish to influence the decisions made by those in power to find out exactly who these ethereal decision makers are, and make them aware of what we consider to be the various complexities surrounding the issues of today.

We need to remember that the people who make decisions also belong to a collective of individuals. Unless these individuals are told otherwise they are going to seek their own desires over what could be deemed to be the collective good. Furthermore, there is always going to be disagreement on what it is exactly that constitutes the collective good. This, however, should in no way deter us from attempting to seek out what it might be. All it quite possibly really means is that we would do well to be aware of what part we play in the determination of the collective good, and of our own motives in the causes we undertake. This of course includes the worthy cause that is psychotherapy. I wonder how many practising psychotherapists belong to the profession from afar.

It is my belief that the current practice of psychotherapy, in its many and various forms, either regulated or unregulated, coupled with whatever our own individual ideologies and motives may be, stands in the place of what would otherwise be a void in the betterment of our society. I can't help but think that we could improve upon this by engaging with policy makers and with our differences with one another, thereby attempting to avoid the pitfall of belonging to a cause from a distance and only associating with those whose ideologies we share. This conference certainly appears to be a step in that direction, for even

by attending I would take it to mean that the people here are those would like to make a difference or be directly involved in a cause, and not belong to it from afar. But of course, I might be wrong.

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