

ZEN AND THERAPY

Manu Bazzano

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Therapy can find inspiration in Zen, a practice rooted in the cultivation of perplexity and wonder. This can provide a welcome antidote to a counterproductive compulsion to know and control human experience. Zen can find inspiration in therapy, at its best a craft that helps one explore the human condition compassionately and unflinchingly. (pp. 16–17)

At home, the central heating is finally, irrevocably broken. At the office, the radiators are temporarily malfunctioning. I'm displeased.

But Manu Bazzano's *Zen and Therapy* is waiting in my pigeonhole and reading is a moveable feast.

Searching for the hottest room on campus, I pass by a seminar where students are earnestly considering "the benefits of a combi boiler." Have I ever seen such a class before in decades of studying or working in a university?

In an empty top-floor classroom, wearing my coat and scarf, I begin reading . . . and I'm instantly enthralled.

I'm captivated by the beauty of:

I write at the cusp of Zen and therapy, from a borderline between these two realms where no checkpoint has yet been erected and no passport is required. For the time being, I luxuriate in the relative freedom of an existence lived in this transient plane. (p. 1)

From there onwards, I want to underline absolutely everything in the book, draw stars beside my favourite bits (even the creative subheadings deserve mention), and annotate, annotate, annotate . . . So I do. I also find I want to pause to appreciate the misty rooftops—always there, never seen—so I do that as well. Later, on page 20, Bazzano is similarly located (it's a day of parallels); but most important is his point that: "by listening to the sounds in the room, in the street and in the sky above, I perceive myself as embedded in this vast phenomenal world, as part of this very moment as it unfolds" (p. 63). My embodied understanding of "presence" deepens.

I'm reading with the intention of writing a book review, of completing a task, "[fulfilling] our culture's demands for goals" (p. 17), but I'm soon sitting with the distinct possibility of never progressing beyond the introduction to this book, of reading and rereading the introduction forever—finding something new and exciting each time. And what would be wrong with that? Why not "encourage exploration and facilitate disorientation" (p. 17)? There's also the chance that I'm having a reader's "intellectual exaltation" (p. 29)!

The wide political intent of the book is clear, powerful, and passionate:

[Many] among us will settle with rehashed therapeutic principles that we then go on imparting year in, year out . . . Reliable and solid, they provide us with a sense of ease and comfort. However, they also help create, instead of a culture of innovation and inspiration a stale design of acculturation or even indoctrination. (p. 8)

There's also a significant, related, pertinent challenge made to the inappropriate appropriation of Zen in contemporary society: "the widespread and shameless reduction of richly ambivalent psychological notions to a list of bullet points" (p. 11).

This book brings together Zen and therapy in ways which honour complexity and openness—the "beginner's mind" Bazzano talks of early in his text. I particularly liked Chapter 5's insistence upon looking beyond an easy correlation between Zen and "the transpersonal."

Back in my own building later (where the heating is still malfunctioning), there is a corridor containing comfortable sofas that I've never seen anyone use. I take up residence, cold but comfortable, swinging my legs, waving *Zen and Therapy*, rather than my hand, at a friend who passes by to a meeting I think I should have attended. I can't stop swinging my legs, happily and excitedly, and I'm not bothered that Senior Lecturers probably shouldn't swing their legs; I love the idea (slightly out of context) that a "loss of intensity" can be "regrettable" (p. 67)—I love hearing Bazzano saying what psychotherapists are encouraged not to say.

"I'm an idiot," one woman says to another; she's lost in one of many winding corridors—but she discovers the woman to whom she speaks is also lost, and they connect. I feel disdainful of a woman speaking of herself like this, and just then the term leaps from the book:

this idiotic exchange may also be described as taking the risk of communication, which is at the very heart of genuine encounter, our real chance to pursue "truth" via engaged conversation, rather than the unveiling of a supposedly pre-existing "Truth." (p. 88)

I grow more mindful of language, less judgemental of people.

Where I don't think I agree with Bazzano is when he says that "the battle against sexual harassment has increasingly become hostility against sex itself" (p. 142). Psychotherapy has much to do in exploring the meanings of "sex" (and "intimacy") and in confronting sexism and engaging with feminism. There is another book here, at least.

As I came (regretfully) to the end of the book (for the first time), I started to think about how I would write about it, what words might encapsulate it; a book review can feel sometimes like a technical exercise with very distinct rules (even if I haven't yet chosen to say that the book has eight chapters, ranging from death to ecopsychology, and that it is definitely, in my view, recommended reading for psychotherapists, in training and qualified). "Intellectual" and "humble" were two words that surfaced first; then saying that it is exuberant, generous, beautiful; then that it is a book that wears its politics lightly and with confidence; but: "there are times . . . when we struggle to find words for our experience . . . This does not apply solely to distress, but may refer to experiences of joy" (p. 119). You may read the book and find your own words.

So—*Zen and Therapy* accompanied me on a cold day in surroundings that weren't as familiar as I had thought ("perplexity and wonder"); and I learned from it in so many ways, practical and profound intertwined, Zen and therapy: from the nature of the rite of passage that is psychotherapy training (p. 20), to the value of exploring suicide in the therapy room (p. 33), to rethinking the meanings of charging for psychotherapy (p. 53). I found Bazzano's delight in creativity and challenge constantly refreshing; there's a real connection between the personal and political in the text.

I hope that I have, in my own way, with my own personal limitations, been able to make responses that honour the spaciousness of the book, while offering an immediate flavour of what is offered. I encourage readers to see this book as a very rewarding location for some slow scholarship.

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