
Radical Psychology

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We all go astray

Leon Redler [[*](#)]

Introductory Comments on 'Recovery'

What's in a word?

I want to comment on the title of our panel, "Taking Recovery Seriously", by taking, and inviting you to *take*, the word '*recovery*' *seriously* and to question it thoughtfully.

What are we really talking about when we speak about 'recovery' in the context of 'madness'? In a loose, imprecise way, we're meaning a return to a prior level of relative well being, or to a less disturbed and/or disturbing way of being, that had been disrupted. We speak of what had disrupted our earlier condition as a breakdown, illness, psychosis, existential or spiritual crisis or have other ways of naming, understanding or framing the origins and nature of the distress. We might even be 'recovering' from *treatment* received, 'iatrogenic' troubles, as well as from ways we've been treated, or mistreated, by any others in relation to us.

When framing the return (if it is one) as 'recovery', what is inside and what's left outside the 'frame'? Is that framing ('recovery') adequately respecting and doing justice to the multiple contexts in which these phenomena come to be and unfold? I think not.

Do we ever get back to the pre-existing (i.e., pre-morbid, pre-distress, pre-disrupted) state or situation? Can we get back to quite where we were or who we were, as though we'd had a fixed identity and place that, post-distress, we were taking up once again? I think not.

Were not the seeds of the later disturbance present in what we, perhaps naively, self-deceptively and/or mistakenly, considered

the earlier state of 'well being'? I think they were. And, if so, wouldn't 'recovering' that leave us again vulnerable to further and perhaps unnecessary distress and disruption of our lives? I think that it would and

I therefore question the usefulness and validity of word 'recovery.'

We can benefit from being more thoughtful about this widely used, 'common sense' and well-intentioned, but I think misleading, term. Many funded projects are based on 'recovery'. That's a practical, but only a *short term*, obstacle to reconsidering our use of the word and finding better ways of saying what we mean that are more in accord with how things really are.

I *know* we have the *potential* to learn from deep disruptions of our lives, the potential to wise up, mature, open heart and mind and deepen our ways of being ourselves, with others, given good enough conditions for that to occur. But that's saying more than the word *recovery* implies.

Perhaps paradoxically, given all of the above, I suggest, in the text that follows, that most of us (humankind, beyond any Us and Them) may need to 'recover' use of, but really *un-cover*, *awaken* to and *connect* with, an inherent potential for well-being which we seem out of touch with (to a greater or lesser degree). Releasing such potential would benefit us individually as well as help us all better understand and responsibly respond to each other and to the prevailing madness of the day.

Our shared world is in many ways *dysfunctional*. That's evident to almost all of us as we watch (in October of 2008, as I prepare to submit this paper), the effects of the breakdown and near (metaphorical) 'meltdown' of an irresponsible world financial system and the potentially more profound and devastating, actual meltdown of our glaciers or icecaps, a function of our unwise, short-sighted and irresponsible care-taking of our planet earth. In this shared world we find ourselves in, or may come to find ourselves in, the *thoughtfulness*, *uncovering* and *releasing* alluded to offer us *sound and radical* ways forward.

We All Go Astray

I want to '*perform* a composition' consisting of a 'Prelude' and 4 'Movements,' as my way of addressing the matter of madness, civilisation and social justice, while taking 'recovery' seriously.

Prelude

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!
Sondern laßt uns angenehmere
anstimmen, und freudenvollere!

Let's hear Beethoven's introduction [\[1\]](#) to Schiller's Ode to Joy as a *prelude* to various allusions to voice, vocation and callings.

My involvement with the Philadelphia Association began at Kingsley Hall (a place where Ghandi had once stayed), in London, in 1965. My informal apprenticeship with R D Laing, based at Kingsley Hall and at Ronnie's consulting rooms at Wimpole St., was primarily concerned with inquiring into ways of radically understanding and responding to 'madness'.

The prevailing understandings, approaches and practices of the medical-psychiatric establishment of the day (and context of my prior psychiatric training in the USA) seemed unthoughtful, harmful in diverse ways (including but not limited to the harmful 'side effects' of treatment), and ignorant and/or disrespectful of the complexity and singularity of the life situations of the patients it attended to.

Could a phenomenological approach, bracketing preconceptions about 'mental illness', free of reductive, objectifying psychiatric thinking and rejecting psychiatric treatments seeking to control experience and behaviour, also encourage the opening up and healing of hearts and minds and invite each person to find his or her own voice, joyfully if and when possible?

For some of us, whether designated 'mad' or not, the journey of

finding one's own *voice*, and *vocation*, and becoming aware of the constrictions of heart and mind, and possibilities for release, can be a long and difficult one, as it certainly has been for me.

What might be the best ways and means of opening our hearts and minds? Looking back then, from now, there were *basic first principles* that informed what made the PA network a good one for me to be involved with, even if I could barely realize them at the time.

Ronnie Laing kept returning, and *re-turning* others, to these as best he could. I would *now* articulate these as including:

Being mindful, with a relaxed vigilance and aspiring to embody that awareness

Putting ourselves in question

Releasing or letting go of what we've realised as unnecessary physical, mental or emotional tensions

Finding the skilful means for putting all these in to practice

And perhaps first and foremost among the first principles, and arguably both the easiest and most difficult to embody, taking to heart St. Augustine's advice: Love . . . *and do as you will*.

First movement

'Beethoven's last musical thought'

One day, listening to BBC Radio 3 in London, I heard of a brief letter that Beethoven wrote to Karl Holz (a trusted friend and 2nd violinist in the quartet that played Beethoven's late quartets) in December, 1826. He closed his letter with a four-measure, two-part canon accompanied by the text: "Wir irren alle samt nur jeder irret anderst" which BBC presenter translated as: "We all go astray, but each in our own way."

Whatever Beethoven may have had in mind, I am going to take the liberty of making use of that sentence in my own way, even while acknowledging I might be going astray from his understanding

and/or meaning.

“We all go astray . . .”

Do we all go astray? Or do just some of us go astray?

Many of our culture’s predominant institutions and laws are founded, at least in part, on the notion that *it’s just some of us* that go astray, whether because of bad genes, bad morals, bad company or other varieties of bad luck.

Some of us indeed do get stunted, stuck, wounded, wound up and twisted along the way of life and suffer, and/or are seen to be suffering, more than others. Features of their suffering include:

Ways of not being ourselves

Ways of not being at home in our own bodies, our breathing and bodies in disarray

Distracted, me-centred, often divided selves precluding us from sensitive sensing of the world, including our own hearts and minds, preventing us from embodying a sense of wonder and enjoyment.

These features, aren’t well or widely recognised or understood, nor are profound and radical means of responding responsibly and effectively widely embraced.

But it seems to me that those features are *common to us all*, to a greater or lesser extent, and that *we all do go astray*.

If that is so, what is it we go astray from?

It seems to me, at least in some lucid moments, that we are astray from living in accord with a way of being ourselves, a way whereby all aspects of who we are...of body, breath, mind, energy, spirit . . . are in harmony.

Most of us, most of the time, are not living that harmony.

Most of us are astray in a way that can do with some re-turning . . . back to basics.

But to speak of how we ‘are’ is already misleading. A major feature of our being astray, or of our errant ways, is that we don’t realise, live and embody the fact that we *inter-are*, and are *inter-dependent*.

Awakening and tuning in to inter-being [2] is enhanced, as are ways of love, joy and realisation of sublime possibilities, when the me-centred 'I' recedes, moves well away from centre court.

Such possibilities aren't really, and really aren't, 'my' possibilities. 'I' can't do anything to 'get' that way, or get on the way. 'I' have to, or the 'I' has to, get out of the way.

How we live with others helps or hinders our finding our way. How we are with each other, how we course and inter-course is, of course, of fundamental importance. That's *obvious*, isn't it? Yet we *seldom* live in and with the presence of *awareness* of that fact. That's obvious too, isn't it?

There is continuity and connection between our breathing, body, mind, energy, spirit . . . and how we relate to one another . . . and the health of the body politic.

Most of us would agree that the body politic seems to be in fairly poor health, when we consider all concerned. All concerned are not really well considered.

How bad do things have to get before each of us is ready and able to take responsibility for what is often done in our name and/or with our passive collusion?

Is there a radical possibility of something other? What might be a way, or ways, that might enhance our sense of inter-being, might enhance our common sense . . . or, should we say, the possibility of a most uncommon common sense?

For some Christian, Sufi and other religious mystics, and others embodying teachings of Yoga, Zen, Dzogchen . . . the way is one whereby one is neither merged nor fused, yet also not separate from all and everything, . . . not fused, not apart . . . not one, not two . . .

Speaking of this is, of course, already problematic. It's beyond our usual notion of experience, which involves a subject of experiencing, and object of experience and an act of experiencing. That doesn't, however, mean that it's nonsense. It may point to a singular, precious, and freely accessible gift of *non-duality*, or non-dual 'experience'.

So . . . is that what we go astray from, or stray from a realisation of what is actually the case, from an embodied knowing of who and how we inter-are?

2nd Movement

Then, The Open Door

Then, at the time of the beginning, the Philadelphia Association had in it's literature a motto. After noting the derivation of the name for the Association from *philia*, there translated (from the Greek) as "brotherly or sisterly love", there was a quotation from the Book of Revelations (3:8, Authorized King James Version)

“ . . . Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it . . . ”

(I cite this and later passages from the New Testament in a non-sectarian spirit.)

What is the 'open door' referred to? What is it's relevance to madness and justice?

How can we create open doors, in practice, such that the opening might especially present itself to and invite vulnerable others who have had doors shut in their faces or been otherwise defaced? How can we nourish and cultivate a spirit and practice so as to show an open door and welcome people who are so lost, confused and/or terrified that they can't tell an open door from one that is shut, or see an open door right before them, or see it but may be unable to make the move to cross the threshold? These are questions that need to be renewed in every fresh encounter with suffering others.

Now, let's consider another New Testament text, First Corinthians, Chapter 13,12-13 (*Authorized King James Version*), where the time of 'Then' is yet to come.

“12. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then *face to face*: now I know in part; but *then* shall I know even as also I am known.
13. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these [is] charity.” (King James translation)

Heinz Cassirer, a man Ronnie held in high regard, translates the passage as follows [3] :

12. At present our sight of things is one through a mirror which throws them into *bewildering confusion*, but there will be a time when we shall see them face to face. At present my knowledge is one yielding but partial glimpses, but there will be a time when I shall know completely, even as God, from the first, completely knew me. 13. Meanwhile, faith, hope and love endure, these three; but the greatest of them all is love. (Cassirer, Heinz, 1989. *God's New Covenant: A New Testament Translation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans)

Levinas and the Face of the Other [4]

For the late and great philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), my relation with the 'face' (or call) of the Other calls me to profound responsibility for her (or him), calls me to ethical relatedness. The Other is singular and the alterity, or radical otherness, of the Other is precisely what I can never appropriate or make mine. (It is this singularity, alterity and call that the capital O is meant to indicate.)

His works are difficult and complex and but deserve and reward serious readers. His work calls to be included in any discussion of madness, civilisation and social justice
Might some forms of madness (individual and/or collective) be understood, in an ethical (rather than a legal) way as involving diminished responsibility, perhaps understanding the roots of madness in part through considering the genealogy of responsible responding and relatedness, or *lack* of it, in the genealogy of the madness considered?

For Levinas, my very subjectivity is a function of my being subjected to the obligation to respond to face of the Other, respond with something like a 'Here I am, here for you'. 'I' am she or he who responds to the Other's calling me and calling on me. I am who I am *in being responsible* for the Other. In this matter, as Levinas derives ethics as first philosophy, I am irreplaceable. Nobody else can relieve me of my responsibility.

He wrote of the trace of God, or goodness, in the face of the Other.

We can be moved by the Other, moved to open our hearts and minds, moved to goodness, moved to respond in responsibility.

Responsibility for the Other can be thought of as a centrifugal force, from me outward, in contrast to our ego-centric, centripetal appropriative moves.

The Other, by calling on me, and subjecting me to the obligation to respond, gives me an opportunity to get out of my egocentric prison. That's quite a *good* opportunity!

When there is just the Other, I am ethically obliged to her. But as soon as there is a third, as there always is (my and the Other's other others, even if no 3rd is present), politics and the scales of justice come into play.

The extension of the ethical relation to and within a wider social and political context can provide a sound basis for the *possibility* of justice, of *justice that may come to be*.

Time and turnings

The accounts and passages above point to a spirit which some of us may have encountered, at least in passing . . . unless, of course, it might have passed us by, gone right past us . . .

But '*then*' can also refer to what is yet to come:

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face

At present our sight of things is one through a mirror which throws them into bewildering confusion, but there will be a time when we shall see them face to face.

When will that time be?

Surely it's got to do with how we live together and treat one another and the possibility, in a time which may come, of something, yet no 'thing,' taking us by surprise, transforming how we are.

When egoic 'I' gets out of the way; when I am he or she who is the one responding to being called, perhaps even prior to hearing a call; *when* between us we find ourselves in our inviting and

opening that possibility, that's probably on the way to seeing face to face in a time that may come to be.

3rd Movement

Losing and Finding, Questioning and Putting Ourselves in Question

A while ago, I saw the Polish Song of the Goat theatre company [5] perform fragments of The Epic of Gilgamesh. They were performing a complex weaving in and out of stories, of narrators, of narratives; telling, with passion and grace, about and birth and death; about the agonies and ecstasies, conflicts and bonds, of gods, men and women, animals and spirits.

They were performing a text on a time of creation, of one of the ancient stories of how we came to be and of the complex fabric of our lives. They were telling us how it was and how it is, calling on us to remember and questioning who and how we are.

They reminded me how the threads of the complex and delicate fabric of lives, or the stories we tell ourselves or are told are our stories, can come undone, how we sometimes *lose the thread*, or the *threads* and how the texts of lives may be disrupted.

We (individually and together) can even *lose* the plot. While such experiences can be disrupting and disturbing, they just might open up an opportunity to find ourselves, perhaps even finding ourselves liberated from destructive and painful repetitions of the plot, a plot that may never even have been one's own plot.

There are perhaps modes of telling that help us *listen* and hear our stories in ways that help us remember and that may help *re-member* us as we remember.

Most of us can use *re-minding*, reminding, for example, of how short, how impermanent this life journey is; how we get in the way of letting others be, with love; how when we can't love, we might nevertheless try to avoid doing harm; and how we need to learn to distinguish care-fully between loving and harmful acts.

We need to understand the experience and diverse needs of others whose lives have been disrupted if we aspire to help them

discover the roots, the radical origins, of their distress that may, in turn, point toward a more sound way of being who they are.

But *how* can we co-create, invite and/or allow such spaces, and optimal conditions (whatever they might be, in each singular case) for people to unwind, begin to get their bearings, and become more aware of the pleasures as well as problematics of their being-in-the world-with others?

Who of us can claim to *know*, and on what *grounds* claim to know, how to live even our own lives wisely, compassionately, opening and flourishing in our being with others in the world?

Who of us can openly and wholeheartedly, respond to another (who might be a friend, partner, family member, neighbour, stranger, patient or client) who is terrified, confused, fragmented, without a sense of his or her articulation with others, lost in psychic and social space?

How can we come to know and *embody* the skilful means needed for the radical understanding of and responsible responding to another in severe distress?

These are matters that I think we all need to keep inquiring into, deeply and critically, for the sake of all concerned.

4th Movement

Way-ing

Given that we all go astray, each in our own way, clearly when we go astray, we need to find our own way, find our own way of way-ing in relation to others, in our own way, in our own time.

Just as our way of going astray is singular, so our way of finding our way needs to be singular.

I think it's helpful for each of us to think about how one would like to be treated, or would like someone we care about to be treated, in the event of severe breakdown, some kind of crisis in one's being, whether or not there's reason to think that a biochemical imbalance or disorder is a primary or contributing factor. Obviously that will vary greatly for each person and situation, but

what would each of us like to find in an ambiance where we or others sought asylum, refuge relief from suffering and access to encouragement, guidance, formal therapies or other kinds of help we might need?

Considering my lessons from the past, learned though decades of experience relevant to these matters, I'll outline below what I take to be key points along the way to keep in mind.

What follows is not intended as a comprehensive list. One does, of course, need to respond to each person and situation in a singular manner. But if these points were taken to heart by a responsible group of people offering asylum and a helping hand to others, others who are finding their very being in the world with others very difficult, when others may be finding being with them difficult as well, the chances for salutary outcomes would be increased and enhanced.

- An authentic *welcome* to the household, with clarity about the hopefully thoughtful and minimum requirements for the safety and well-being of all concerned
- *Courtesy* and *respect* for the Other
- Auto-rhythmia [6] : Inviting and allowing each person to find her or his way, unconstrained by cultural, institutional or familial imposed schedules regarding when and how and with whom (given mutual consent) one eats, sleeps, gets up, eliminates, goes in or out, and so on
- Discovering how 'bodymind' can unfold and open when relatively free of outside pressure to conform and becoming aware of the constraints we impose on ourselves and have habitually maintained. Clearly there may be times when any of us might be need less freedom and more containment. But that should, to whatever extent possible, be arrived at by mutual understanding and consent, with clarity as to the purpose and time frame of any limiting of someone's free choices and clarity regarding what's at stake and for whose benefit someone's choices may be limited
- Becoming more aware of body, speech and mind, starting with basic mindfulness of breathing, noticing patterns of disturbed breathing, learning to let ourselves 'be breathed' and breathe

freely

- Observing and acknowledging whatever thoughts and feelings are arising (as in basic eastern meditation practices)
- Unwinding from all the ways we get twisted, physically, mentally, emotionally; unwinding from being wound up and/or wounded
- Releasing Through mindfulness of body and mind, learning to release unnecessary tensions, holdings on, contractions, constrictions, at all levels
- Coming to one's sense as unwinding and releasing open the way for feeling more, seeing more, perceiving more, and in more open, relaxed and likely less distorted ways
- Enjoyment -- Beginning to enjoy what one may perhaps only now be beginning to feel as one's own life space, less obscured and constricted and dampened by previous defensive compartments and manoeuvres
- Dwelling and being with -- Being able to take one's time, in one's time, in time shared with another and others, to dwell, linger, wander, wonder, form diverse kinds of relationships with others, including Eros [7], Philia, Agape, different kinds of loving possibilities
- Meeting oneself and others -- Beginning to have a sense of who one is, how one is, and, from that previously obscured place, meet others.i.e, meet the Other (the singular, Levinasian Other who calls on us) and the others previously seen very partially and in distorted ways . . . and finding ways of respecting the needs others also have to find their way, without impinging on their way

Responding to the face of the otherand open to the call of the other

Moving toward responsibility . . . responsible for the Other and others

And toward a justice to come . . .

The houses back Then, in the early days of the PA, were embedded in a social *network* where cultivation and enjoyment of the arts (music, painting, literature, and lots of in-house theatre!) and learning about and practicing diverse 'body/mind/spirit' disciplines (e.g., yoga, mediation, martial arts) as well as the psychotherapeutic arts (and their intellectual foundations as well as questioning those foundations), were all on our way. Indeed, they *were the way* of the PA. But we were only at the *beginning* of a long learning curve.

It seemed to me that the first principles (I spoke of in my 'Prelude') and some of these points lost their place of (*uncontested*) priority in the PA as it became more of a psychotherapy training and professional organisation, more institutionalised and more involved with bureaucratic and administrative compromises.

As psychotherapy and psychotherapists came to play a larger part in the PA's houses, those houses also became *less readily accessible* to people in acute and severe distress.

Ways and means offering help to people, more at the heart of the PA in our earlier years, such as arts referred to above, featured less, or not at all, as psychoanalytic psychotherapy and meetings convened by psychotherapists became the primary and privileged way of helping others.

A sense of a collective aspiration to cultivate relationships and activities that could enhance the possibilities of people going beyond provisional limitations and flourishing, shared (more or less) by many of the people back 'Then,' diminished with moves toward professionalization.

I think what was lost was a passion to inquire into the roots of suffering and the possibilities for radical and profound healing or prevention of unnecessary suffering. Intimately related to that, the other side of the coin, as it were, was a *passion* find authentic ways to celebrate, in a non-sectarian way, what's been called the '*sacrament of the present moment*' [8], in our shared life space and life time.

The chances of 'celebrating the sacrament of the present moment,' flourishing and going beyond current limits are diminished by

having to fit in with requirements of registration and funding bodies, with their various codes and rules. It's not impossible, but it is difficult and certainly a real challenge

Yet celebrating the sacrament of the present moment, flourishing and going beyond current limits ought to be our priority, as they constitute perhaps the greatest gifts we can give each other and ourselves, Now . . . and Then, in the time 'to come', and to those yet to come.

They offers us a sound basis for embodied, wise, compassionate and responsible thought and practice as we attend and respond to the vital matters of madness, civilisation and social justice that call on us.

Notes

[1] Ludwig van Beethoven - Symphony No.9, Op.125 "Choral", 4th movement, Baritone Recitative, from introductory words to Schiller's Ode written by Beethoven, translation via Classical Music Pages, http://w3.rzberlin.mpg.de/cmp/beethoven_sym9.html

[2] A term I learned from by Thich Nhat Hahn's talks and writings. See <http://radicalpsychology.org/vol7-2/www.plumvillage.org>

[3] Cassirer, Heinz, 1989. God's New Covenant: A New Testament Translation. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans

[4] See E.Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, Duquesne Univ. Press, 1985; L Redler, "Open, Empty and Other", Contemporary Buddhism, Vol. 1, No. 1, London, 2000; Gans and Redler, "Just Listening", Xlibris, USA, 2001

[5] <http://radicalpsychology.org/vol7-2/www.piesnkozla.pl>

[6] R D Laing, <http://laingsociety.org/biblio/audio.colloquies.htm>, 1987, interview with Dr. D Kelly, London

[7] From the Greek for erotic love, brotherly/sisterly love and love as compassion or charity

[8] A term R D Laing called to my attention about 30 years ago. He found it in the writings of Jean Pierre de Caussade, in letters of instruction to the Nuns of the Visitation at Nancy, where he was spiritual director from 1733-1740. I found this detail via Wikipedia.

Biographical note:

Leon Redler qualified in Medicine in New York (1962) and left a psychiatric residency there when invited to work with Maxwell Jones and R D Laing in the UK.

He was apprenticed to Laing for many years, re-searching the sources of our suffering and the possibilities of profound, ethical and effective responding to our distress. He remains in London, practicing psychotherapy and teaching. Published work includes Just Listening: Ethics and Therapy, co-authored with philosopher/therapist Dr. Steven Gans, in 2001.

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