



Horticultural Therapy with Survivors of Torture

(Clive Critchley, Natural Growth Project Worker, Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture)

Introduction

Below are four anecdotes taken from the experience of running a garden group for men who are survivors of torture, which is part of my work at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture (MF). Referrals for this group, (as with all the other Natural Growth Project work of the MF), are received internally from clinical staff where they feel that some complementary benefit can be achieved beyond the consulting room.

The group under discussion here meets once a week in a North London allotment garden, with a comfortable and large cabin equipped with gas cooker and heater. Group members are offered a range of garden or garden-orientated work. This can include maintenance of the plot, propagation, greenhouse work, planting and tending vegetables, helping to tame a wild plot, carpentry, paving, or a project like remaking an old hut, etc. The basic brief for the group remains as it was when it started five years ago: to provide a supportive and safe outdoor space that will have value in itself, while also providing a place where working and social skills can be reactivated and/or learned.

It is also important to point out that as well as being torture survivors these men are asylum seekers. They live in poverty — £41 a week is what the Home Office currently allows a single man — and they are prohibited from working. The asylum process is a disempowering one, where outcomes are uncertain and where appeals can last for several years. In addition many of these men are separated from their families.

All struggle with the constant fear of being returned to the country they fled — an anomic experience in which clinical depression and anxiety are endemic. Given this, the small securities of a weekly and accepting group, the seasonal round of nature, and the contacts made with others in the same situation can become of both practical and therapeutic value.

“The ducks have come back ”

For about two months, from late spring, three ducks appear in the small pond, coming and going as if we are not there. S. notices their first return before me this year (12 months before, the thoughts of his traumatic past black out the light, he is totally disinterested in the ducks). But this year his eyes catch and follow the flight. “Look, the ducks have come back!” His restored sense of wonder helps him drop the planting task in hand, then he takes the initiative: “Time to sit down,” he says. Gradually over the next five minutes the rest of the group tune in and sit with him. We realise something is happening with S., who normally much prefers to “work” and lead rather than relax. Nothing is said, but some invisible sense of caring is in the air.

Practice Ideas:

- 1) Be opportunistic with what happens unexpectedly.
- 2) Be alert to non-verbal moments.
- 3) Retain equanimity in the face of apparent lack of change (for example: restoration of a sense of wonder may take time).

“Make me sweat”

It took W. a month to gain the confidence to tell me what he wanted: to “sweat” again, not play with flowers, he said dismissively. From then on it was clear what to do: digging out roots, scything rough ground, lifting pots, sawing wood. A few weeks after he started the more heavy work he told the group: “If I sweat today I can sleep tonight.” Sometime later W. surprised me with another insight when he said digging did not have to have a result. Just digging was enough: “It changes my mood.”

Practice Ideas:

- 1) Encourage a space (without verbalising it) where the client has the confidence to ask for what (s)he wants.
- 2) Horticultural Therapy in a friendly atmosphere does not have to be goal-orientated; it can sometimes suit someone for it to be an end in itself.

Can I show you how?

The task at hand today: fixing slabs, mixing cement, using a chisel to shape the stone. B is helping me, but I sense that something else is going on. Suddenly he resists no longer: “Let me do it, I used to do this all the time in Kosovo.” Given the hammer and chisel he tackles the stone with precision. His attentiveness seems to propel him into the moment. I become his helper for an hour. And just for a while I sense him free himself of his usual counterpoint anxieties — the future and the past.

Practice Ideas:

- 1) Where it helps the development of the group, be open to receive help oneself.
- 2) When someone is suddenly “in the moment”, leave it alone, don’t verbalise it.

Moment of empowerment

Yesterday there was an African moment in the group. For the first time there were three men from different African countries with us, two of them had been persecuted and tortured for being trade union leaders. They were taking fuchsia cuttings and then cleaning up the greenhouse. A comradely mood seemed to come over them. Later, over tea with the whole group, they stopped speaking like “broken” men. They shared the experience of state tyranny in the face of trade union activity, but with strength in their voices. They spoke well, they spoke to each other, and they spoke to me. Just for a while, in the midst of nothing, they felt like empowered men again.

Practice Ideas:

- 1) Allow space for something to happen between group members, with limited, or even no intervention by the facilitator.
- 2) Be alert to the empowerment that can result from “finding the other”. Here, the discovery of shared difficulties faced by embryonic trade unions in different African countries meant the creation of an empowering bond between these three men.

Conclusion

It is clear, as horticultural therapy commentators elsewhere have suggested, that one reason for the benefit derived by such client groups is that the world of plants and natural history lie outside the world of human society. The love of nature generated can offer a solace of great value to those for whom human trust has been severely violated.

The joy to be found in propagation and the starting of new life, beyond a life experienced as irreversibly defiled, can have startling significance. For those whose statements of self-description

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often refer to the closing down and frozenness of their own life, this can truly have both symbolic and practical benefits.

At the same time, the ordinary world of small kindnesses between group members and the “sharing” of experience is equally vital. Furthermore, the value of a return to physical work for the body, and the still time engendered thereby in the mind, cannot be overlooked. The returning self-respect that comes from re-acquaintance with tools, and contributing, in a small way, to the practical work of the MF, can also play their full part. Such merits when taken together can play a major role in healing and restoring the human spirit.

{Please note that the Medical Foundation provides a broad range of holistic treatments. Full details can be found on the website at <http://www.torturecare.org.uk>}

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