

'Time Past and Time Future'

(T.S. Eliot)

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What connects family therapists as a discipline is something rarely looked at. It seems our field is obsessed with highlighting difference which often slips into criticism and attacking the work of colleagues. This patriarchal behaviour invades most family therapy forums, and yet at the same time there is a belief that we have moved away from patriarchal ways of operating. Newcomers to the field experience this confusion somewhat like visiting a 'Mad Tea Party'.

As a family therapy trainer and practitioner, I have become increasingly aware of factions in the field and have concerns that the conflict is slipping beyond what one could call 'healthy competition'. As I'm coming up to my 20th anniversary in the field and my 155th student, reflections have led me to wonder what will be the outcome of the current practice of criticism, or maybe more accurately attack, on each other's work.

"No room! No room!" They cried out when they saw Alice coming.

Added to this is the popular practice of denying both the influence of earlier family therapists and in turn their legacies.

And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.

By ignoring historical progression we allow the work of the 90's to be presented as entirely unique, never before heard of by human kind.

You say I'm repeating something I have said before. I shall say it again.

This attitude promotes rifts and divisions in the field, creating an atmosphere of hostile competition.

"It wasn't very civil of you to sit down without being invited," said the March Hare.

Practitioners who want their work to be acknowledged seem to believe this can only be done by slandering the work of others. I am tempted to cite examples but realise by doing this I too would fall into the same trap. When people are first drawn to the field the emphasis on difference is confusing, often resulting in an inability to hear the excellent ideas.

"I didn't know it was *your* table," said Alice: "it's laid for a great many more than three."

Strangely enough, there is something about this crazy tangle that seems to unite us as a field. In the past I remember criticism being directed to traditional treatment models, for example the medicalizing of problems and long term psychoanalysis, so we as a group had something

to be against. Now the *one truth* is 'solution focused', any other beliefs are redundant and irrelevant to the new god.

"You should learn not to make personal remarks," said Alice with some severity: "it's very rude".

Solution focused? Surely the idea of bringing about solutions was the occasion for our tea-party? In the epistemology of my cracked tea cup are old leaves from the 70's and stored amongst them are the memories of how exciting it was to discover that family therapy actually worked. Even back then family therapy was a model that encouraged people to seek and use their own resources.

I would like to add here that my intention is not to demean the currently popular models, which have some exciting focuses and are great fun to teach, but to bring forth a reminder from the 'old days' of Nathan Ackerman, Don Jackson, Milton Erikson, Virginia Satir and many more.

Handed down from these people was the most important aspect of family therapy practice — *what is happening between people defines their reality*.

"There's no such thing!" Alice was beginning very angrily, but the Hatter and the March Hare went "Sh! sh!" and the Dormouse sulkily remarked "If you can't be civil, you'd better finish the story for yourself."

"No please go on!" Alice said very humbly. "I won't interrupt you again. I dare say there may be *one*" (a treacle well).

What we do in our clinical practice with the belief that relationships define the individual is dependent upon our own heritage. Consequently, no matter which brand of family therapy we like to believe we practise, we share the presupposition that what happens between people is of more relevance than what happens within the individual.

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This is what the constructivists would call 'fit' or, as the M.R.I. group might say from their use of group theory, a common denominator.

The importance of broadening frames, constructions, lenses or landscapes — whatever words you choose — the idea of helping people develop an extension on their view of the world, is another belief that unites us as a discipline.

Alice did not want to offend the dormouse again, so she began very cautiously: "But I don't understand. Where did they draw treacle from?"

In the stickiness of our 'treacle well', we find the value of drawing forth people's strengths and competency.

All of us enjoying this 'mad tea party' have felt the influences of Gregory Bateson and so awareness of the importance of language is, again, something that family therapists share. Through the process of clarifying the words used and the beliefs that feed them.

"I've had nothing yet", Alice replied in an offended tone: "so I can't take more."

"You mean you can't take less," said the Hatter: it's very easy to take more than nothing."

How people go about utilizing this idea in their daily practices is different but the awareness of its importance runs through all of our work.

Another idea from Bateson, and probably elsewhere, is the concept of restraints, and that people have solutions within, but are unable to access them because of the influences of our culture and relationships. Instead they continue to use solutions that seem to give the problem more life. This concept has been put succinctly in a number of models, for example, MRI's the 'solution becomes the problem', Michael White's 'the life support system of the problem', etc.

Also from Bateson is family therapy's use of the Theory of Logical Types as a model for classification and clarification; not to mention its usefulness in sorting out our own fuzzy thinking: in the class of family therapy, 'solution focused' is one member, not as some might lead us to believe, the class of which family therapy is the member.

"If you knew time as well as I do," said the Hatter, "you wouldn't talk about wasting *it*. It's *him*."

Utilizing the concepts of class and members runs across the field; the language may vary but all models have techniques for sifting through communication tangles.

The final idea from Bateson that I will bring forth here is that of 'patterns that connect'. The importance of the play between similarities and differences defines the brews we enjoy at our 'tea party'. Earl Grey or English Breakfast? They may taste different but they are both still tea, what's more they belong to the same Twining family.

As a profession we seem to need to emphasise and amplify difference, and it is this need to define ourselves by 'being against' that I believe is responsible for family therapy still being a fringe therapy. The successes all of us boast about should have led us into mainstream practice by now. Freud felt the impact of his work in one lifetime. Because we have not focused on and developed aspects of thinking that unite us, but rather concentrated on technical differences, we are still regarded by those in charge of funding as an unimportant discipline. Remember the 'Utopia syndrome' written about by the M.R.I. group in their book *Change?* In our striving to find the perfect model, have we become so obsessed with the goal that the premise has been lost from sight as we bicker in the treacle?

In opposition alone does it feel itself necessary.
(F. Nietzsche)

We are still bound by a patriarchal way of operating, and the minute one of us devalues the work of a colleague, the system from which we are trying to escape has caught us. Despite wanting to move from being centred in power, hierarchies and conflict to thinking systemically, we are stuck in a patriarchal 'treacle well' and we are 'well' in.

At the 'Mad Tea Party', no progress was made, just a continuous moving around the table until Alice finally got fed up with the craziness of saying one thing and doing another, and left. She, like many curious visitors to our field, found the criticism and hypocrisy pushing her away.

"At any rate I'll never go *there* again! said Alice "It's the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life!"

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