

RENEWAL

PUTTING GESTALT INTO ACTION

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Reflections on Romania

Paul Barber

Romania is many cultures in one! And the people - very varied but for the most part sincere. Non-trusting of authority but authoritative, and very like ourselves in the 1960s - coming out of a repressed and depressed time when we felt we had been over-controlled and over-trusting of government, were breaking free of 'the Old' but not yet comfortable with 'the New', thirsty for new ideas and experimenting with free expression and humanistic and person-centred notions of engagement. Indeed, I often have flash-backs when teaching there of my history in encounter-groups, the early days of experiential learning and the excitements of speaking authentically and questioning traditional authority and breaking free from convention – all I experienced in the Human Potential movement in the 1970s. So here I am, time travelling yet feeling at home!

I do love the mixed up meeting of cultures and races in Romania - the Latin taste of people in the centre who remain influenced by leftovers from Roman occupation 2,000 years ago, the Turkish input from the 16th century, the Russian looking ones in the north and the oriental Mongol ones from the Genghis Khan hoards who rode through in the 14th century, the Gypsy villages - and all this mix comes out in the adverts and buildings and clash of styles and tastes! Exotic and familiar simultaneously.

Bucharest reminds me of 1960s Manchester, re-building following the war, deprived of an efficient infrastructure with power and responsibility slowly being clawed back from the State to the Person - still survival conscious but hopeful of the future. Romanian humour has much in common with the Northern English, banter and testing, ironic and involving. For instance, last winter I sat outside a bar in the Old Town of Bucharest, writing my notes, sipping pints of lager. The barman came out and asked if I would like to come in to the warmth. "No thanks, I'm a cold fish from the North of England" I said, "This is not cold – just fresh". We chatted for a few minutes and he walked away saying there are many forms of madness! A little later a barrel of beer was rolled into the bar. He came out an hour later and said "I told my boss to leave the barrel outside and just give you a straw!". We both

laughed. Twenty minutes later he brought out two shorts glasses with Cherry Brandy – "Will you take a Snaps with me?". We clinked glasses and downed them in one. Such encounters are not rare. People here have learnt to make the best of hardship and to laugh through their difficulties.

I recall an incident that anchored me to Romania, which I relayed in e-mail to friends:

Last night I was rescued by a little girl of 21. A big man such as I reduced to being mothered by a child, a child I had taunted mercilessly all day... how will I ever hold my head up high again, my street cred is gone forever! Are you all sitting comfortably, then I'll begin.

We had been for a meal and drink at a palace – but I wasn't Prince Charming and there was an absence of Sleeping Beauties! Still, a palace is a palace and a drink is a drink – and, as the Irish say, many a man believes he wants a wife... when he only needs a drink!!!

So here was I, sipping my cocktails, listening to jazz in superb company, not knowing what the Universe had in store.

The drive home was uneventful. Said my goodbyes and walked to the block in which my flat awaited, looked down, no front door key! The maid had been earlier and a caretaker had borrowed my keys - it gradually sank in... NO KEYS?

I ran to the road in time to see the car I had left driving away. I phoned my client's number - no reply. Remembered she had switched off the mobile earlier. Walked back to the block, no need to worry, if worst came to worse I had my client's business card. Pulled it out, NO ADDRESS ON THE BUSINESS CARD! So I pressed various flat numbers via the intercom but the first three did not answer, the next 5 did not answer and the next 5 did not answer - so I stopped pushing the Universe and surrendered.

So could I survive on the streets of Bucharest overnight? And then I remembered - I was carrying £3,000 in cash as my week's fees!! I remembered how wild the Gypsies look around here. I had seen three women and a child spitting and smoking and flashing gold teeth and looking like untamed animals with brown leathery skin - would they eat me alive?!! My imagination envisioned them with sharp pointed teeth!!!! Shook off this fantasy just in time to see a pack of wild dogs run past me and knock over a bin - would they eat me next???? There was only one thing to do – I started to laugh.

Over the next hour or so I phoned my client's number 7 or 8 times to be met with a robotic voice saying 'Your number has not been recognised'. Wild ideas crowded in - flagging down a police car, but the Police are trusted here less than the Gypsies, going to a nearby monastery in the Old Town to seek sanctuary, going clubbing all night, phoning Ken in Normandy and seeing if he could get through to my clients...

but when I phoned the robot in my phone said "Number not recognised", tried switching networks... and several attempts later got through to an answer phone. But, whatever, and when the going gets bizarre do not the bizarre get going? And they come no more bizarre than me - so you tell me my dear friends!!!! So why, friends, are you not here now, when I need you? Friends indeed!

Having walked around the building and thrown stones at lighted windows to open dialogue, having exhausted my stock of good ideas, I settled back to my fate. I would walk the streets of Bucharest. Oh yes, I forgot to tell you how I was dressed! In Chinese silks like an escapee from the National People's Republic of China's Circus - so no fear of being unnoticed by the Gypsies then!!!!!! A fleeting though interesting notion surfaced - how might I taste roasted? NO - so I set off to find an all-night bar in the Old Town.

Within ten steps my phone rang. Cora, the daughter of Gina my client, the daughter who had dressed like Greta Garbo and whom myself and her mother had teased all evening, the poor child who I had accused of putting style and grand gestures before substance. The shame of it all to seek her help now!!!! "Well Paul, is there something wrong?" I explained, I didn't need her help so do not bother coming out, just inform the caretaker - I'm a big boy and can manage - so I thought.

Sometime later she phones back - the caretaker sounds drunk, she can get no sense out of him, she will be with me in five minutes.

She arrives. Picks up my key, does something I've never seen before - presses my blue plastic key fob against a side plate - and as if by magic the door opens!!!!!! But I've always used the key and no one showed me this and.... I catch myself surprised and feeling childlike and wish there was a big enough stone to crawl under. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!! Now I have to start being grateful and courteous and nice and charming to her... double ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!! She looks at me like a kind mother would at a brain damaged child!!!!!! She escorts me to my 6th floor flat to make sure I can use keys properly, like real adults... ahhhhhhhh, will I ever recover from this? Will my male ego ever shine again? Is the feminine rising to give me a Zen slap?!! I'd threatened to put her on my knee and spank her for being a precocious child earlier this evening - now her graciousness feels like a pillow suffocating the fight out of me!!! Women fight dirty!!!! Here 'niceness' wounds so deeply!!!

So dear readers, it is a sadder yet wiser man who writes this email, a man who has been forced to see the error of his ways, a man without pride, without ego, without hope in this cruel female world, a mere male non-consequence, destined to be rescued by stylized little girlie creatures who ride on horses like knights in shining armour while I await tied to the stake and helpless, waiting to be saved!

Say a prayer for me, say 2000 Hail Marys at least as you kneel with your rosaries, the others light your incense sticks and know I am sitting in the fire!!!

As you can see, I'm starting to love Romania, its people, history and culture. Unlike the Americans who offer superficial warmth, but I often experience as cooler the deeper I go with them, Romanians are cool on the outside yet warmer the deeper you relate - more 'Old World' than 'New World' in tone.

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The Energetic Messages of Antipathy and Empathy

Steph Newall-Smith

I intend in this piece to examine whether working in an environment of negative influence and emotional embattlement affects not only the emotional self, but also the physical. It is a well known and – some would say – well researched fact within psychotherapy and counselling that it is 'the relationship that heals'. The experiencing of pure attention and empathy, which is a rare jewel in this world of busy "me-ness", poses for me another question: 'Has anyone ever investigated or considered the human effects of the polar opposite of empathy – antipathy?'

This investigation has been sitting in the wings, awaiting its turn to arrive. At last I am finding a way to write this piece on antipathy and empathy, which I dedicate to a man who spent the last years of his life, fighting battles for others at enormous cost to his health and spirit.

Tim Field was a man who experienced a negative workplace. As a result of that experience he resigned from a highly paid job, became very ill and spent some time in therapy before starting his own website "Bully on Line", an on line support group which still exists today. He also wrote the book "Bully in Sight".

I met Tim a couple of times and also read his book. Meeting Tim I found him to be a man consumed by his life's work – supporting and helping others who had been through a similar experience to his own. He was tall and very very slim; seemed to be strung tighter than a piano wire – and I felt grave concern for his health even then. His book I found a very angry and bitter read. When I commented this to him he agreed that he was still an angry man.

Tim died of cancer at the beginning of this year – he died peacefully and accepting that his time had come.

I am left wondering – could he have avoided this untimely death by giving his soul time out from the constant battering it took when advising others experiencing similar negative working conditions? His on-line forum is supportive to those who need support when feeling alone, and yet, it also attracts others who can be

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negative and damaging. Spending so much time dealing with negative people, I cannot help but feel he suffered as a result. I dedicate this piece to the memory of this man.

In my own mind I see each human being carrying a “Spirit level” inside. And we are not always aware of how low our spirit level has fallen. Research has shown that babies who remain un-nurtured eventually die of neglect – it is not the lack of body needs but nurturing needs that kills.

I am reluctant to retread and review my own experience of such an environment, as I feel I have told my story too many times. Yet there is merit in the description.

I worked in an office in a junior position. I reported to two managers who in their turn reported to the overall Manager. I learned when I moved into this office that staff turnover was high in this place. It seemed to me that the overall Manager controlled everything and everyone within the place with a rod of iron. Her rules reigned. Some rules were spoken and others were unspoken. The rules that were not obvious were there to act as tripwires. Her controlling manner was not outwardly loud, and yet it undermined everything we did that she considered to be wrong (ie not her way of working). Each sub manager was encouraged to report back to her all errors or differences of opinion as to the right way to work. When this manager had stored up enough “evidence” the reportee would be given a date and time for a meeting – usually several days ahead – and feedback would then be given one on one. The list of wrongs seemed endless.

In the first months of working in that place I became very angry with the Senior Manager – and I felt I could do nothing about it. After many one to one sessions, and public humiliations in front of others in the room I built an emotional wall around myself, would not allow entry of any more negativity, so as to preserve the tiny amount of self esteem that remained in my core. I knew that one day I would leave, which eventually I did. Two years later I resigned from that business completely – exhausted emotionally and physically. I suffered muscular tension in my back and shoulders constantly, headaches and backaches, high blood pressure, anxiety and depression. “Watching my back” was a reality for me.

Letting go of that place was like cutting the steel wires, which I – as a robot, had invented to keep me upright and alive whilst working in that business. The day my resignation became real was the day I crashed emotionally. That is my story.

I now wish to look at the other side of the coin. Positive emotion and energy have an equal effect on the human spirit. To illustrate this I wish to quote from the books of two writers – Oliver Sacks and Paul Broks. Both work in the field of neurology and, their writings illustrate their deep empathy and passion for the suffering humans in their care. If it is possible for a brain damaged patient to attain a level of quietude through simple human and spiritual contact, then it is doubly possible for the undamaged self to grow and blossom through positive emotional contact.

Oliver Sacks in his book "The Man who mistook his wife for a hat" writes of Jimmie - one particular lost soul, who aged 49, who lived constantly with only the memory of himself at the age of nineteen – unable to recall anything beyond that time, and unable to root himself in the present day. 1945 was his yesterday now. A man resigned to living in a now which was lifeless and fleeting. And yet... and yet... the sisters in charge told of a time when Jimmie did come to life, when he did seem perfectly at ease and quiet. When committed to the ritual of chapel worship:

“...I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before in him or conceived him capable of (...). Clearly Jimmie found himself, found continuity and reality in the absoluteness of spiritual attention and act”.

Sacks also speaks of a man named William who lived his life similarly to Jimmie but in a higher state of excitement. William was never peaceful and constantly confabulating, Sacks writes this of him:

“...he sometimes wanders out into the quiet and undemanding garden which surrounds the Home, and there, in his quietness he recovers his own quiet. The presence of others, other people excite and rattle him, force him into an endless frenzied social chatter, a veritable delirium of identity making and seeking...”

I have been particularly struck by the stories written by Sacks of his contact with patients affected by the sleeping sickness epidemic post World War 1. He writes movingly of the progress of those patients who were ‘awakened’ by the use of L-Dopa many years later, and their progress.

Rolando P, one particular patient eventually pined away and died. His mother had visited him tirelessly even into her old age. When she eventually ceased visiting, Rolando went into “a severe emotional crisis...two months of grief, pining, depression and rage...” However this loss was mitigated by the intervention of a warm compassionate physiotherapist on the staff. Her motherly role and the time and effort she devoted to him, gave him the love and time he needed. However, during a period of staff cuts this physiotherapist was dismissed and Rolando went into stunned shock. With the passing of weeks Rolando was:

“showing severe mental breakdown, compounded of grief, depression, terror, and rage...he continually pined for his lost love-object ...”

By the end of the month Rolando had become profoundly Parkinsonian again. At the beginning of the following month Rolando was subjected to a battery of tests for “organic disease”. On seeing the trolley arrive he pushed the technician and trolley away yelling:

“Can’t you fuckers leave me alone? Where’s the sense in all your fucking tests? Don’t you have eyes and ears in your head? Can’t you see I’m dying of grief? For Chrissake let me die in peace!”

He died in his sleep four days later.

Again in writing about Miss A a woman who received L Dopa and suffered the extreme highs and lows of side effects, Sacks speaks of her as a person of contradictions, having split into a dozen different Miss A’s:

“...the drinker, the ticcer, the stamper, the yeller, the swinger, the gazer, the sleeper, the wisher the fearer, the lover, the hater, all struggling with her to possess her behaviour”.

And yet she finds normality....

“Music calms her, relieves her distraction and gives her, its coherence and concord, and so too does Nature when she sits in the garden”.

Sacks writes of her on her return from visiting her sister:

“...above all she is recalled by a single relation [a favourite younger sister], the only one which still preserves for her undivided meaning and feeling. (...) Miss A is radiant when she returns from these excursions, and describes them in detail, with feeling and wit, at such times there is nothing ‘schizophrenic’ in her thought or her manner, but a return of wholeness and the sense of the world”.

Paul Broks in his book “Into the Silent Land”, which tells a story from his time as a young trainee, of a young man who fell down a lift shaft and suffered severe skull injuries to the left side - he writes of this young man:

“His face worked relentlessly, writhing with anger and dread. Mostly anger. He would growl and grunt and sometimes howl, but apart from occasional volleys of obscenity he was incapable of speech (...)”.

He writes further:

“(...) what disturbed me most was the flickering screen of his face: bleak images of a soul in torment. Or so I imagined. (...) Then one day I happened to be around when the boy’s mother came to visit. I watched as she cradled his broken head in her arms. For the time that she was with him, but not much longer, an

extraordinary transformation came over his face. It became still. The rage subsided. He seemed to regain his humanity. Here were two selves, not just a mother and a broken shell of a son. The whole was greater than the sum of its parts....”

For me this story says more than any other, and sums up my feelings about positive emotions and human to human contact in particular. This broken son found quietude even in his most broken state, by the simple presence of his mother. How could he “know” her to be there? If a broken human can gain temporary quiet from such contact, is it not therefore likely that both positive and negative emotions or energies have a direct effect on each one of us, in every moment of our day, in every contact we make.

Attending...

I sit and you listen, I pour my heart out and you are still here, do you never tire of my story? You accept and accept and accept and do not turn away. You do not laugh, do not mock are not shocked. Can I let you in to my deepest self? Can I trust you with my deepest soul? Do you have room for more?
It is so.

References:

Awakenings – Oliver Sacks

The Man who mistook his wife for a Hat – Oliver Sacks

Into the Silent Land – Paul Broks.

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