

Zen and therapy: heretical perspectives by Manu Bazzano, London and New York, Routledge, 2017, 166 pp., £31.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-138-64631-5 by **Julie Webb**, Psychotherapist for *Person-Centered Experiential Psychotherapies Journal*, Autumn 2017.

'When you write, your words must go bim bim bim, bim bim bim, bim bim bim. Each line must be full of delicious little juice, flavour, they must be full of power, they must make you want to turn a page – bim bim bim...'

Charles Bukowski

When you pick up one of Manu Bazzano's books you know you have to prepare for a big trip, you know you will travel through a delightful and rich poetic landscape, and you know at some point you will come to a screeching halt in order to circumnavigate your way around an uncomfortable bend. I want to say this though: just like Zen practice, and Therapy, you have to place your trust in the process, your experience, and the relationship which is created between you, the text and the author. Bazzano is a necessary heretical spirit and he keeps himself on the borderland, refusing to submit to any sham for the sake of fame, fortune, or hubris. He prizes our existence as travelers on this 'transient plane' across 'uncertain terrain' and reminds us to be 'sceptical of systems and expedient formulas' (p. 1). This is a crucial attitude in the current therapeutic 'market' whereby we may feel compelled to offer quick-fix solutions and all too often simplify the complexities of the human condition. The text provides a critical enquiry of what Zen and Therapy are and can be, and also serves, I think, as a reminder of the humanistic values embedded in Person-centered experiential therapies.

The cover for this book is telling: not quite black, not quite gray, not quite white. There seems to be a mountain but maybe it's a forest? There appears to be a kind of gentle mist obscuring definition. This image fits with the tone of the book and the subtle message that lingers throughout that implicitly asks how can we, not just practice as therapists or zennists, but principally *live* with 'an open, unembarrassed attitude of perplexity at the magnitude of the world, and of human life within it?' (p. 7). Bazzano offers a complexity of multilayered descriptions, not as answers to the question, but as a palette of multi-colored touchstones that create scenes and stories. The palette is made up of philosophical discourse, politics, literature, art, Zen teachings, therapy writings, music including rock and jazz, all gently punctuated by tender personal experiences and anecdotes.

From the beginning, Bazzano sets the scene and helps us identify how Zen and Therapy may be aligned:

... Zen and therapy are widely different ways of responding to our being in the world, yet the notion that Zen addresses the *absolute* (the ultimate, the sublime, the relation of the finite self with the infinite...) while therapy addresses the *relative* (love and work, feelings and so forth), is a little naïve. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that each can inform the other and together may allow us greater agility and supple movement between the absolute and the relative dimensions. This is when ‘working on oneself’, that stern imperative of self-improvement culture, becomes more akin to playing or dancing. (p. 2)

The whole text from here on is an interplay, a dance, between the two realms, with the author eruditely, yet playfully, weaving examples and discussion from an array of relevant and sometimes surprising supporting material, all punctuated with sweet, humble gratitude in personal reflections.

The text brings a clarity to often perplexing notions, and yet oversimplified and prevalent ideas of knowing and not-knowing, self and no-self, body-mind, and living-and-dying, not as separate entities or processes, but as unquantifiable, immeasurable lived experiences. Unquantifiable and immeasurable are at odds with most of contemporary culture. As such we are presented with offerings of the inextricable bindings of identity to non-identity, conscious to unconscious, difference to non-difference, separation to non-separation. These offerings are deftly delivered with the skill of a formidable and artistic writer. There is an order and logic to the book, with eight enticing chapters that are helpfully broken down into many sections, like verses in a poem.

A favorite chapter of mine is Chapter 3, ‘Zen and therapy: two expressions of unconditional hospitality’ (pp. 43–58). It is a reminder of perhaps what I might call Bazzano’s core stance and is reminiscent of his work in the unparalleled *Spectre of the Stranger: towards a phenomenology of hospitality* (Bazzano, 2012): a recognition, even homage to, our homelessness on this earth and what this may mean in the context of our lives, Zen and therapy:

To romanticize the lives of drifters, travellers and people at the margins would mean conveniently glossing over the very real suffering and difficulties these lives entail. Yet at the heart of Zen teachings, as I understand them, we find an emphasis on homelessness (tokudo). The person becoming ordained is said to embrace his/her metaphysical,

symbolic and, at times factual refusal of a permanent dwelling. This does not mean that we cannot, or should not, make our home on earth. Nor is it an advocacy of uprootedness and of the spindrift gaze towards the heavens. It is important, however, to relativize somewhat the exaggerated importance our culture gives to territory, dwelling and identity and, in parallel, to notions of ownership all tied to our Promethean attempts at gaining mastery over a world that is by definition out of our reach...Homelessness points beyond familial, a domain which all psychotherapists and psychologies have arguable become trapped. One way this could be translated and understood is that the work of therapy ...and Zen deal with our desires and hatreds, our sorrows and fears in relation to the wide expanses of history and the world – hence not entirely apprehended and settled within the narrow province of family. (pp. 43–4)

After the three treasures, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, Bazzano provocatively and ingeniously asks whether psychotherapy may be considered the 'Dharma's *fourth treasure*' (p. 12):

The first treasure is the vivid example of the historical Buddha. The second treasure, the Dharma is the corpus of his teachings, and Sangha, the third treasure, is the encouraging presence of a community of practitioners united by a common intent ... The emphasis here is on ethics, on the social dimension and the actualization of the teachings in the crucible of our everyday interaction with others ... The present era may then be the time when psychotherapy adds something valuable ... The treasure in this case is a deeper level of understanding psyche as well as 'unconscious emotional communication in the relational field'.

It is my feeling that the 145 pages that follow are an attempt to enquire about that notion (not once and for all time, or as a kind of dogma) but as a genuine, attempt to make a valuable contribution to discussions of Zen and Therapy. The purpose of which may be to not allow either one to be swallowed by the neo-liberalist, and capitalist culture of commodity, evaluation and measurement. This is a book about living our freedom, as people and practitioners (Therapists and Zennists) whilst simultaneously feeling our constraint:

By embracing both the relative and the absolute, a fluidity is created that injects a sense of mystery and poetry in the everyday while at the same time bringing down to earth any fleeting experience of the sublime. (p. 148)

Reference

1. Bazzano, M. (2012). *Spectre of the stranger: towards a phenomenology of hospitality*. Easbourne: Sussex Academic Press.
2. Bukowski, C. Retrieved April 9, 2017,
from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTPxWkBgW6U>