

# Interview with Robin Shohet

## by Nicky Ferry, GCS Training Development Manager

I recently attended an event billed as a 'talk' by Robin Shohet, on the theme of Spirituality in Supervision at Gloucestershire Counselling Service in Stroud. The event quickly developed into more of an experience of spirituality in supervision rather than a downloading of Robin's thoughts on the subject.

He set about clarifying the term spirituality as, 'not something abstract and ethereal to make you feel better, but as that which allows us to be truly present and real, uncluttered by left-brain concerns.' Refreshingly real and challenging, Robin gave those attending an experience of confronting their own self-protective fears in a playful yet direct way. I asked Robin afterwards to talk further about his approach to his supervision training work.

**Nicky Ferry: *You talk a lot about the right and left-brain in your approach to supervision training, can you say more about how you see the balance between the two?***

Robin Shohet: I was brought up to overvalue the left-brain. At 21 I had a psychotic experience for a few hours after eating dope, and saw the depth of my own craziness. Then I heard myself say the words, "There is no fear (of anything external); the fear is inside me". The psychosis stopped instantly and I felt deeply peaceful. What I came to realise was that my left-brain had become completely terrified as it was no longer in control, and finally it had packed in. What was left was peace.

In terms of my work, I recently described it as making an alliance with the part of the person who wants the truth. This enables me to be very challenging, as I was during the talk at GCS. I want to invoke the right brain, which is beyond simple right/wrong dichotomies and sees a much bigger picture. I believe much of therapeutic work has an unconscious drive towards protection (under the guise of safety, standards and so on) and if you explore deeply, you will see fear at the bottom of this. There is a huge amount to say on this subject, but to keep to your question, I have just finished a book, which I strongly recommend called '**Return to the Brain of Eden**' which is all about this topic.

**N.F. *How do you work with people to encourage and develop a stronger right brain experience and approach?***

R.S. Fundamentally, I try and expose faulty left-brain thinking and show that it is no longer useful. As part of this, I run workshops on fear and love in supervision. I tell people that I believe (my core belief) that love is who we are and it is covered by fear. I ask people to share their fears and help to normalise them (given that fear thrives on secrecy and is often fuelled by shame.) Much left-brain thinking such as blame, comparisons, anger is not recognised as fear - but upon examination - can be traced back to fear. I use the approach of Byron Katie, a woman who became a spiritual teacher after she had an awakening that led

her to question all her thoughts [www.thework.com](http://www.thework.com). She asks four questions, the first one being, "Is that true?"

Because the left-brain invents stories to keep the illusion of control, Katie dismantles the stories with that question (and others). People laugh when they realise they have been holding on to untrue stories and making themselves miserable.

For example, I ask people to finish the following sentence, asking them to write down their answers. I stress that I will not ask them to share it as I do not want them to censor.

"What I would least like my supervisor to know about my work is..."

Then I ask them to finish the next sentence:

"I would not want them to know because..."

I go on to ask if they would be willing to share the second sentence (it is only the first one I said I wouldn't ask, and there is no pressure to share this second one.) Answers for the second one typically include; "I wouldn't want my supervisor to think I was unprofessional," or "I would feel judged," or variations on, "they would think I was not good enough."

I show how these thoughts, which come from fear, do not stand up to scrutiny by asking, "is that true, you are unprofessional?" Or, "are you in fact judging them?" Or, I normalise not feeling good enough by asking if there is anyone in the room who has not felt good enough? I tell them if they are really not good enough they should not be practicing, so why do they believe the chatter in their head? The reasons for not sharing turn out invariably to be left-brain chatter, and I invite participants to challenge this faulty thinking. Very often people look at what they have written and see it simply is not true and they would be perfectly willing to share with their supervisor the answer to number one. They have been held hostage by not challenging their own left-brain thinking. Frequently there is huge relief.

This can lead us on to examining core beliefs. A core belief might be something like, 'I will never be good enough'. They are typically generalisations - words like 'never' and 'always', are usually part of them. They are often formed at a time of stress or trauma to keep us safe. But typically these thoughts become embedded as left-brain truths yet the right brain will see a much bigger picture.

***N.F. How do you see the dilemma professionals have in that they need to engage in left-brain activities such as accreditation and gaining qualifications to be taken seriously, yet as you point out, those formal assessment processes can be adulterated with fear?***

R.S. There are no easy answers to this question. As a way of trying to understand more about the process, about twenty-five years ago I instigated two conferences to look at the dynamics of accreditation. What emerged from these conferences was the IPN (Independent Practitioners Network) whereby you form peer groups who stand by each other's work. To help reduce possible collusion, a representative from another group visits your group. This person's role is to both challenge and support as in the supervision process. Similarly someone from your group visits another group. This system is harder to maintain, but those who have, find it remarkably rewarding and empowering. Furthermore, there are organisations that recognise this as a form of accreditation.

This brings me on to a second point; how easy it is to give our authority away. It is perhaps a form of laziness (far easier perhaps to say BACP accredited rather than forming a peer group, going to visit other groups, writing up your visit, and have someone visit yours), but it runs deeper. In times of fear - and I believe we are living in a zeitgeist of increasing fear - we resort to more primitive ways of operating. Questioning beliefs as well as the zeitgeist itself, and being willing to stand alone, are not easy ways of operating.

Thirty-five years ago, I wrote a book on Dream Sharing. As part of my research, I came across a book called **"The Third Reich of Dreams"**. It is a collection of dreams from Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1939. The dreams showed clearly that amongst many of the people who consciously hated and had cause to hate the regime, their dreams told a very different story. In those, they were saving Hitler's life (a Jewish doctor) or being singled out for special commendation, or seeing brown shirts walking past and thinking how ridiculous and in the next moment being among them, and loving the feeling of belonging. What is interesting is that those that actively opposed the regime did not have this type of dream. At the end of the book is an essay by Bruno Bettelheim who says that most of us have authority issues, fueled in part by a need to belong, even if it means giving our authority away.

I have seen therapists giving away authority because they believe that they have to, not questioning training and accrediting bodies for fear of not getting their qualifications. I believe that the push for accreditation can take on a life of its own, putting systems in place that need more systems to check their efficacy. If we look deeper, we might discover that in times of fear we opt for power rather than trust. I think IPN tried to deal with this dynamic, putting relationship at the heart of the process, and I believe therapeutic work stands and falls on the basis of relationship, so the accrediting process should ideally mirror that.

And here it is perhaps useful to look at our philosophy. If therapy is seen from a cure perspective, then we can fail and are pushed into getting results. If it is seen from a developmental, spiritual perspective, then we use everything as an opportunity to inquire, to go within, to learn, or more accurately unlearn, as we go from left to right brain. Curing a person's symptoms is a byproduct of looking for a deeper meaning and connection.

As Byron Katie says, do the work of inquiry for the love of truth and not to feel better. This moves us away from the cure model, which can be a huge trap.

In my experience, there is much we can do internally whatever is happening externally. I like the work of Ben Zander, an orchestra conductor with the Boston Philharmonic. He tells his students at the beginning of the year that they are all "A" students. All they have to do is write a letter to him, telling him how they got their A. He asks them to fall passionately in love with that person, and this is the person he teaches. When asked what do you do with students who are not A, he replied that he only takes A students.

This is very much in line with the philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry, which posits that things move in the direction that they are perceived. In other words if you see good, then good is more likely to occur. If you see "A" students, then you bring out their "A-ness" if you will excuse the awful pun, which I made inadvertently the first time I said it. If you don't trust

people, they start to behave in untrustworthy ways. So, in our training, at the beginning we tell people they are 'A' students, and we never fail anyone. If it came close, as it once did, we would count ourselves as the failure.

For example, we had a very good student, but she was so critical that we ourselves would have been frightened to be her supervisee. We felt we could not let her go through. On realising this, we worked on ourselves, our left brained critical parts, meeting them with compassion. (We were in fact in parallel process – critical of her criticalness). We saw similarities with her and that she was carrying part of us. The next day when watching a video of her work together with her, we were a lot more open to her, and perhaps as a result she was able to identify the origins of this very critical part. She later said that this had been a turning point in her work as a supervisor.

So whatever the external circumstances, we can always do the internal work, as we did in looking at our own critical parts. We could ask, "I need this accreditation. Is that true?" "Can I really know I would get less clients if I don't get this qualification/accreditation?" The answer may be yes, but it might not. Other avenues might open up. Who knows? And I am not against accreditation as some people might think. I just want to encourage a form of inquiry, to consciously go for qualifications rather than be driven by fear.

I will end this long answer with a story. Long ago somewhere in the Middle East close to where the Tigris met the Euphrates was a little village where the people there were full of regret. It was their currency. "If only we had built a road through our village, all the trade would have passed through our village and how wealthy we would have been." "If only we had planted wheat instead of rye, which now fetches a much higher price, how much wealthier we would have been." And so on. So the elders decided they would bury the word 'If'. They dug deep and buried it well under the earth. They felt very satisfied and were enjoying their celebration when someone said, "If only we had buried it deeper." In other words if you do not feel good enough no amount of qualifications will help. The problem is in the mind, in our thinking, and an external solution rarely helps in the long run.

People have said that our supervision training is quite demanding, for although we have not gone for external accreditation or asked for written work, we are asking people to question their belief in authority, their fearful thinking and their need for an external approval (including ours).

***Robin has worked as a supervisor since 1976 and co-founded the Centre for Supervision and Team Development in 1979, specialising in training supervisors. He is co-author with Peter Hawkins of the seminal text 'Supervision in the Helping Professions' (first published in 1989, now in its fourth edition).***

***He will be running a part-time Certificate in Supervision Course with his wife Joan Wilmot at GCS starting December 2017.  
For more details contact GCS: 01453 766 310 [training@gloscounselling.org.uk](mailto:training@gloscounselling.org.uk)***

