

A Community's Coming of Age – A Psychotherapist's Perspective

I am a psychotherapist in North London and have been practising for the past 8 years. The idea for this article arose as a result of having been at a series of social functions recently during which the question "And what do you do?" was put to me. The range of comments and questions to my answering this question has been consistently revealing, amusing and at times somewhat depressing. Here is a sample:

*So you're a shrink?
Are you analysing me?
The people that come to you – are they crazy?
Do you advise them?
Don't they become too dependent on you?
Do you solve their problems for them?*

(Hands up those of you who've had exactly these questions!)

I tell them that the kind of people who seek the services of the likes of me tend to be people just like themselves - and indeed myself! It occurred to me that there might be a forum in which to present a more realistic picture of psychotherapy to balance out the one that these responses might suggest.

The Community

The world over, Gujaratis have an uncanny knack of being able to maintain an essential Indian-ness while at the same time being permeable to the host society in such a way as to be able to 'integrate with integrity'. The community in Britain is maturing. It is generally perceived as being one of the most affluent, successful and vital ethnic minorities, strongly independent and fiercely proud. Indeed it has every reason to be.

Like many Diaspora communities, Gujaratis have come through bitter years in the face of economic hardship and an atmosphere marred with persistent and widespread racism of the sixties and seventies. These decades were lived with a steely determination to transcend the situation, with back-breaking effort under gruelling conditions. The community's abiding characteristics contributed in no small measure to this enterprise: a flare for business, a strong sense of family, and a faith which is both a constant, nurturing backdrop as well as an unquestioning well from which much is sourced.

Those early generations hoped against hope that their daughters and sons would suffer less and reap the benefits of a life that education offers. Traditionally the community has been renowned for its business acumen and its noticeable presence in the professions - accountancy, medicine, engineering, the law and pharmacy for example. Now one only has to notice the credits of any radio or television program to recognise names both in front

of the camera or microphone and behind the scenes. Subsequent generations are branching out into areas far afield of those clichéd careers. They now pepper the various media and the performing arts. Not to say that there is not more ground to cover.

No longer as marginalised, our Community is becoming more a part of mainstream British life. It has come through the worst and is heaving a sigh of relief. And just as a person, having established himself in adulthood has the space and inclination to take stock and look back over what has gone before in preparation for what may come next, so I think does a community. It faces a different set of challenges now.

Fresh Challenges

Everything has two sides. Nothing is ever only one thing. The history of any human endeavour deemed to have been successful also bears witness to a catalogue of failures and losses. There are now opportunities to look back and celebrate, but also to consider what the cost of such a struggle was, to look at the other side, the pain, the regrets, the losses. What happened, for instance, to the individual whilst prioritising the group?

For newer generations, there is more choice than there has been in the past. There are more opportunities to follow dreams, and not necessarily to take on the baton of the family business or tradition. How does one reconcile the wishes of the previous generation while honouring one's own drives and ambitions? How does one acknowledge and pay tribute to the pioneers while being true to one's own aching need for self-expression?

For many others, there are painful questions of not belonging, of not having made the mark, of not fitting the profile of the prolific, ambitious individual who did the done thing, got married, settled down. Or indeed did these things and then had to reject them all in the interest of sanity. How do we make sense of our lives in the midst of such contradictions? Are we trapped in a state of alienation? Or is it possible to transcend this state, to forge a path which naturally emerges from our own being as we engage with such thorny issues?

For yet others, there is the question of how to engage with the spiritual life, especially in the midst of a busy and consumer orientated culture. We live in a community, both our own and the larger host community, in which we are constantly required to tread a fine line. On the one hand we are being pulled along a conveyor belt in a trance like manner, encouraged to take more and more of what the commercial world has to offer in order to define ourselves. On the other, we need to carve out a space for ourselves away from all that, in order to reflect and decide for ourselves how we will be defined.

Psychotherapy

I am not suggesting that those entering psychotherapy do so with the explicit intention of exploring these sorts of questions. The reality is that the majority of people enter psychotherapy, not because they are 'crazy', but because they are in pain. They enter it because they have hit a limit in trying to make sense of, to live with or to calm the pain.

To my mind, pain is an inescapable and defining aspect of being human. It is part of the package. Pain bears witness to our fundamental humanity. The nature and source of the pain may differ. It could be as definite as difficulties in relationship, frustrations to do with career, challenges posed by failing health or a deep depression. Conversely, it could be a less definite but constant unease in the depth of our being about who we are, where we are going, or when all is said and done, what the point of it all is – despite the fact that all the ticks are in all the right boxes.

But in the very experiencing and exploring of the symptoms and the feelings associated with the pain, these and other similar issues and dilemmas will be stumbled upon or uncovered. And in the process of trying to make sense of the tensions and ambivalences we find ourselves in, a new way of being in the world may be discovered, a fresh orientation may emerge.

By the time the person has made their way to the consulting room of a psychotherapist, they have already had to negotiate a number of prevailing conceptions: Is engaging with my vulnerabilities in this manner a sign of weakness? Isn't it self-indulgent? Shouldn't I be able to overcome difficulties by myself?

Over the years that I have been practising, I have observed that when faced with difficulties we tend typically to fall back on the stoically held traditional attitude of self-sufficiency, dealing with them either on our own or turning to our nearest and dearest.

When we do go outside the family we find ourselves confiding in Holy men or Astrologers who consider our plight and prescribe a certain set of behaviours and disciplines to assist us in our times of tribulation. There is indeed wisdom in this ancient science and authority in those who can read the stars and counsel the vulnerable.

In the eighties and nineties, it was predominantly, and somewhat ironically, my English contemporaries who would attend Yoga classes as part of their exploration into the alternative and/or the spiritual life. This has now very clearly made its way into the wider Asian community, particularly now with the popularity of Ram Das Swami. People these days regularly attend Yoga classes and retreats. This is no longer considered 'alternative'.

The younger generations have also availed themselves of what is now common in the market place. They are flocking in their hundreds to personal development workshops of various kinds, as for example those of Anthony Robbins. These can and do deliver powerful experiences.

Amidst this mix, I want to make a strong case for psychotherapy. I want to bring it out of the shadows and place it alongside these and other contexts as a valid and effective one for engaging with the givens of existence. It may not be for everyone and by no means is it a panacea. But it does need to have the stigma removed from it. Now perhaps more than ever, it needs not to be taboo. Rather, it needs to be a resource able more fully to be exploited. Of the people who come to see me, a number of the ones from our community do so reticently. Already in pain, they carry the added burden of shame or guilt, often keeping from their friends and family that they are engaged in such an endeavour.

And a deeply satisfying and fruitful endeavour it can be. It is most definitely not the quick fix, and it is not always easy. However, it can be one of the most nourishing and healing experiences we can offer ourselves. Experienced psychotherapists bring amongst other things, a sensitivity and a genuine capacity for listening, an ability to be truly present and a depth of compassion to their work with individuals – a set of skills and qualities finely honed over a number of years. Above all, they *accompany*, they *witness* and they *mirror* the person in front of them on their unfolding journey much more than they direct or advise.

It is almost unimaginable the depth of healing that is possible when a person grapples with what seems like the rough edged underbelly of existence, the loose ends, and the darker emotions in the presence of an experienced and trustworthy witness. One who fully and reliably observes and assists the individual in understanding the various threads, themes and patterns of his or her life. I feel privileged to be walking this road with fellow travellers. While the terrain is at times bumpy, I am more often than not left in awe at the manner in which people reach resolution, find new ways of relating to themselves and the world around them, and heal. I am left marvelling at the richness of the journeys I am entrusted to witness.

Lastly, it is a significant investment of energy, emotion, money and time. As in much else in life, resonance and fit are all important. When seeking a psychotherapist, it pays to trust yourself, since above all, it is important that you feel comfortable with the person you choose to work with.

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