

ROG IN THE WILD – HELEN ROSS

GAZING INTO THE MORNING LIGHT: THE QUIET REVELATION OF ETHICAL PRESENCE

A few months ago, I was sitting with a cup of coffee, watching the sun come up. As the morning light warmed and spread, hazy shapes sharpened into plants and trees, and a fiesta of colours began to illuminate the everyday familiarity of my garden. I became absorbed, and the more I gazed, the more I began to see. Tiny notes of colour, shape, space and place seemed to call for attention, and for an endless moment I simply noticed, going wherever my gaze was drawn. It was as if the garden was familiar and yet completely new at the same time, and the extent of possible detail seemed infinite. And then a thought penetrated, suddenly. “I really ought to do something to fix that fence!” Instantly, the exquisite particularity I had been immersed in morphed back into its day to day ordinariness and I sat, aware of an intense pull to ‘get on and do’ at the same time wanting to return to the still presence I had just experienced. The completeness of the moment was gone, and yet encountering the vitality and depth that was living ‘hidden in plain sight’ had somehow changed the relationship between me and my garden.

It struck me a while later that this experience is illustrative of the quality and depth of the ethical presence, (Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2020), that is the cornerstone of ROG. A radically relational approach, ROG holds that our stance as a person and a practitioner is not an objective view of people or events as if we are on the outside looking in. Likewise other people, the contexts we encounter, and indeed we ourselves are not static entities which conform over time to a particular description. Instead, ROG holds that our experience arises continually through the dynamic, emergent interrelationship between three elements/lenses at the same time: self, other and situation, (Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2013). In a state of ethical presence, our stance embodies a balance of all three, described by Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, (2007), with Presence described as ‘energetic availability and fluid responsiveness’.

In this state of presence, I gazed at my garden. Through the ‘self’ lens I was deeply aware of and attuned to my body, noticing how alive and vital and alert I felt, and how relaxed. Through the ‘other’ lens the experience was akin to listening to music. Everything I saw unfolded the next thing I saw, and yet I was not deliberately ‘looking at’ anything. I was inside it and outside it at the same time, my gaze moving wherever it was drawn, lingering more in some places than others, not needing to know why. And through the ‘situation’ lens I was aware of how much was continually changing in the field as a whole, and the enormity of what I missed in the everyday pace of life. My habitual narrowing down on something that needed to be fixed suddenly seemed so impoverished – and yet at the same time there was no judgement in the realisation.

Having worked as a senior OD practitioner for some 25 years prior to ROG, the centrality of presence in working relationally with people and systems was not new to me. And yet just like the slow revelation of the morning light that day, the impact of ROG on everything I thought I knew and understood about presence was, and continues to be, profound and far-reaching. It is revealing webs of assumptions,

beliefs and ways of being in my work that, just like the view of my garden, have unwittingly become my everyday 'map of the territory'. This is notwithstanding the hours of regular weeding, fertilising, watering and responsiveness to the weather that I have brought to my journey. This awareness has dawned in its own way and at its own pace, without a need for me to 'do something about it' - and yet is calling forth an irreversible and ongoing shifting of being and perspective.

To cultivate ethical presence as an OD practitioner and coach is a bit like supporting this slow irreversibility of the morning light in our work. Recently, I was working with a group of senior hospital leaders who wanted to find a new approach to a familiar, urgent, complex and conflicted set of challenges in which they reportedly found themselves going round in circles. Having discovered together that they repeatedly mobilised but did not act, our work to stay with 'sensing' and 'awareness' so that we could reveal more about the pattern, seemed intractably difficult to support. The moment we began to build contact in the group, the metaphorical 'doing something about the fence' would intrude and disrupt it. As the illusory promise of eventually 'knowing what to do next' grew more compelling, I realised that I had become caught up in a parallel process of trying to 'find the fix'.

In this pivotal moment, I felt a beat of despair. As I stood amidst the frustration and intensity of expectation in the room, breathing into the tightness of my chest, feeling the steadiness of my feet on the ground, and letting my gaze include each of the human beings I was with, a question arrived: what if ethical presence here is *being* the gaze I felt watching my garden, rather than '*gazing at what is happening*'?

It is hard to find words for what happened next, which in a way captures the essence of presence. There was *space*. There seemed to be more time. People began to relax and find their own ways to explore, and more people volunteered thoughts and perspectives. Silence became okay. In retrospect I can see that by rooting myself in my embodied sensing and surrendering my egological grip on 'delivery', I offered the support that the group actually needed. This released their potential to reveal what they were ready to see. In the words of one participant, "none of us could have done this on our own. We need each other, and we need to work together. When we try to force it we just dig a bigger hole!"

This group had talked repeatedly about the need to 'work better together' before and yet hadn't changed their behaviour. Since this experience they have not only scheduled and sustained regular contact and communication, but they also report improvements in their morale, wellbeing and relationships and their ability to hold emerging issues and changes in perspective.

REFERENCES

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HELEN ROSS BIO

Helen Ross lives and works in Scotland. An experienced OD practitioner and executive coach of some 25 years, she works primarily in the public and third sectors, with a particular passion and interest in the reform of health and social care.

Helen was 'called forward' very early in her self-employed career to explore deep questions about supporting profound change in people and systems, and to develop ways of thinking and practising that are congruent with her natural draw to a relational, co-creative stance. In 2012 she qualified in Organisational Transactional Analysis, gaining a rich web of systemic maps through which she could work with clients to co-design ways to approach complex problems. The profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and escalating volatility and uncertainty since, drew Helen to expand her frame of reference into the 'radically relational' ground of ROG. It is here that she is currently developing ways to support people and systems to deepen their capacity for presence and responsiveness to the challenges of our times, and prioritise health, connectedness and relationship in their work to find sustainable ways forward.

