

Therapy with Leon Redler - a story of disillusionment

I 'saw' Leon Redler on and off over a period of about ten years. One of the puzzling questions for me is how Leon Redler managed to exert such a strong hold on me; essentially how could I have been so taken in by him?

Looking back I notice that I never or hardly questioned him. On the few occasions that I did he was readily able to throw off my criticisms. For example, he was able to persuade me to have 'family therapy', something which I had never asked for or intended and which when he first suggested it I strongly refused. Essentially though his hold over me is shown by the fact that I 'saw' him over a period of about 10 years on and off, spending a substantial part of a low income on the sessions, and yet got absolutely nowhere in terms of the one question which I first asked him about. After those 10 years I was trapped for a further 3 'seeing' his acolyte whom he had 'highly recommended' to me.

My perception at that time was that he was a very experienced, wise man, a rare authority on psychological and existential problems. Where did I get this from? There are a number of factors; i) his association with R.D.Laing, ii) the fact that he was a doctor and iii) his manner in the sessions. Taking these few in more depth:

i) I had heard of Leon Redler as someone who was an associate of R. D. Laing. This was at the time when, having dropped out of University, I was reading a great deal and was enamoured especially by the work of R. D. Laing. In fact the one book that made a great impression on me was *The Divided Self*, and that (I see with hindsight) more for its excellent writing style than for its content. Already at that time I had felt that his subsequent books such as *The Politics of Experience* or *The Facts of Life* were more empty gesturing than anything else. Nonetheless when I heard that a friend had made the acquaintance of someone who had been close to this iconic figure and offered to give me his address I was interested. I was young, impressionable and desperate for intellectual companions or guides; precisely what I had hoped for but found totally absent in my theology course at Oxford. The writings of R. D. Laing had filled a gap in my mind; he seemed interested in theology, in literature and in humanity. In my need I missed the fact that his best work was on individual or family psychology and his attempt to make himself socially relevant, *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* didn't fly.

I wrote to Leon Redler asking if he would see me for free on the grounds that I had very interesting problems. I didn't really want to become a paying patient of a psychotherapist or psychiatrist. Redler replied that if it was 'just for interest value' he 'would pass' but if I wanted a 'professional consultation' for a fee he would see me. Of course, the actual fee (which turned out to be £30.00) was not mentioned. As a young man it was of course unbearable to feel that I was being 'passed over' not to mention the implication that I had wasted the great man's time. I went to see him. In the first 'session' I started to give him some biographical information. I expected that I would give him this, as one gives a doctor an account of the symptoms or the pain, and he would respond with some kind of recommendation. He cut me off, with a gesture. I didn't 'have' to tell him all this though I could if I wanted it. I swallowed the hook. This was a key moment. I had expected a 'normal' dialog. I would tell him something and he would respond. In this move he excused himself from responding. From now on I was just talking. I had, fallen into the mode of producing a non-reciprocal monologue to which he was obliged to listen, but not respond. This can go on for ever. How easily did I become a patient! How little he had to do! One deft move sufficed. Later, at the right time, he was able to deepen the effect, which is a sort of trance, by asking me if I minded if he took notes. The psychiatrist sitting in his formal office chair, the patient in the other (comfy) chair, the patient talking his monologue, the psychiatrist taking notes. The patient is objectified. It becomes not the authentic meeting spoken about by R. D. Laing but a formal rite of doctor and patient, a pseudo-clinical situation. (In passing R. D. Laing charged around £60.00 for an authentic meeting in the late eighties).

ii) I was impressed by Leon Redler's being a medical doctor. Dr. Leon Redler. I was brought up in a

typically bourgeois way to trust medical doctors absolutely. In my bourgeoisie family milieu the person of the Doctor had considerable authority. If a doctor said 'swallow this pill' I would swallow it. At best I might say "really", but if he said yes that would be the extent of my refusal.

Michel Foucault, in *Madness and Civilisation* talks about how 19th century psychiatry arose out of a moral treatment of madness in the asylum, the institution of the asylum itself being created at the start of the 19th century. (Foucault shows how the asylum as it formed at the start of the 19th century in France and Britain was a strictly moral affair. The liberation of the mad from confinement in brutal 18th century conditions was only to wrap them in new chains of religious - in England - or bourgeoisie - in France morality. Madness was understood as transgression. The mad were made to feel their guilt and take responsibility for it. There were differences in this model in between France and England but the differences came together in the role of the psychiatrist, at the moment that the medical man took a central role in the asylum). Psychiatry in Foucault's archaeology of its inception gained its authority from a moral ground; the person of the doctor embodied family, the law, order, morality. Soon, though, positivist psychiatry had to explain the dependence of the patient while not admitting that this (old fashioned moral authority), rather than any real medical knowledge of mental illness, was the source of its authority, power and even its cures. It did this by attributing the mistake to madness; madness was; "not what one believed, nor what it believed itself to be; it was infinitely less than itself: a combination of persuasion and mystification". (1)

Brought up to accept the authority of a Doctor I trusted Dr Leon Redler. His business cards and headed stationery said he was Dr Leon Redler but offered a qualification 'New York state licensed physician'. A search of the online database of registered doctors operated by the General Medical Council does not return any results for 'Redler'. It occurs to me that if Dr Redler is not registered to practice medicine in the United Kingdom this little sentence would be a necessary qualification to avoid a charge that he was misrepresenting himself. His cards could say 'licensed in the state of New York, USA', which would make it clear. The phrasing 'New York state licensed physician' distracts the reader from the fact that this is a qualification, a caveat, and presents it as something positive. In other words it is spun. (Registered doctors are expected to put their GMC number on their stationery). It is interesting that on the web site of the Philadelphia Association, the charity set up by R. D. Laing and others to care for 'schizophrenics' which now operates as a conventional school of psychotherapy and which includes amongst its members Dr Redler, Dr Leon Redler is not represented as a Doctor but simply as Leon Redler. The extent to which Leon Redler's Dr title is applicable to his therapy practice seems to be in some doubt if it is on his own headed stationery but not on the web site of his 'professional' body. The biographical information on this web site and in an online *Curriculum Vitae* states that Leon Redler "undertook a post-graduate training in paediatrics and psychiatry in the USA". This appears to leave an ambiguity as to whether or not this training was completed and whether Leon Redler is qualified, even in the USA, to practise as a psychiatrist. Leon Redler tells a story of how during his period of psychiatric training he was subject to a formal disciplinary procedure for speaking with a patient outside of his remit, and how this formed the background to his coming to the UK to undertake his 'apprenticeship' with R. D. Laing. There is an irony here: the story is told perhaps to illustrate a comradeship with patients, but Leon Redler engages in a standard psychoanalytic practice of entirely non-reciprocal relations. Of this relation Foucault writes: "He [Freud] focussed upon this single presence - concealed behind the patient and above him, in an absence that is also a total presence - all the powers that had been distributed in the collective existence of the asylum; he transformed this into an absolute Observation, a pure and circumspect Silence, a Judge who punishes and rewards in a judgement that does not even condescend to language; he made it the Mirror in which madness, in an almost motionless movement, clings to and casts off itself." Leon Redler calls his practice 'Just listening' which seems to encapsulate the sense of Silence and Judgement which Foucault refers to quite neatly. (1)

It was critical to my willingness to believe in Dr Redler, to believe that he was a "thaumaturge" (Foucault again) who had magical powers and a wondrous kind of esoteric knowledge, that he was a medical doctor. Here was someone who could operate in the realm of the soul with the same

objective precision as someone who operated in the scientific field of bodily ailments. I would have been much more ready to doubt and question a psychotherapist than a medical doctor. When occasionally I raised doubts I allowed myself to be silenced by Dr Redler in a way that I think I would not have done with a psychotherapist.

Dr Redler's claim to be a doctor rather than a simple psychotherapist played a major role in prolonging my dependence on him.

iii) How did he keep me for so long? I 'saw' him for an initial period of some years. During this period I lived for 9 months in a 'Therapeutic Community Household' run by the Philadelphia Association, which was recommended to me by Leon Redler. Then I moved to another town. For a while I did not see him; then I wrote to him with a complaint about the 'Therapeutic Community Household'. It was managed by another Philadelphia Association therapist who, in my view belittled the residents. In some ways I thought he had behaved simply wrongly; for example, without my permission he had gone behind my back and (though he had no statutory authority at all) spoken with the local authority about my circumstances. I expected Leon Redler, as a senior member of the Philadelphia Association to be concerned. After a lengthy period Redler wrote back explaining that he had been very busy. He found, he said, my letter hard to read, though it was 'important'. He invited me to come in and read it to him in a session. I did this. This cost me another £30.00. Needless to say nothing happened. Leon Redler took no responsibility. He had managed to turn my complaint into part of the 'therapy' and to collect a fee at the same time. In taking so long to reply and explaining that he was busy, despite the fact that I was a paying client, his main business, we see the underlying attitude to patients prevalent in psycho-analysis, an attitude which the writer Jeffrey Masson exposes in Freud; Freud apparently referred to patients as "riff-raff". Taking so long to reply to a patient and using the excuse that you are busy when seeing 'patients' is your main line clearly does treat the patient as "riff-raff".

On the theme of "riff-raff". On one occasion Leon Redler literally sent me out of a session on an errand to buy him a coffee. He gave me money to buy one myself; but this puts me in the position of a child running an errand for a tip. I was not I recall offered a choice about running this errand; I was simply sent out like a child. Foucault, in the work already cited describes how when William Tukes established his new form of asylum at the start of the 19th century one of the features of the regime was how inmates were treated as if they were minors, answerable to the man of reason - the guards. The patient in the Doctor-Patient relationship occupies an essentially childlike role. R. D. Laing called this the 'asymmetry' of psychotherapy. On another, extraordinary, occasion Redler told me peremptorily that he had to end a session early. When he held out his hand for the fee, (he preferred to be paid in cash), I really wanted to query whether there should not be a proportional deduction but I didn't. He certainly didn't offer it. This raises the question as to what the fee was for. If it was for his time and he had to cut the time short then logically (and he should have seen this) the fee should have been reduced. If the fee was not for his time was it for the privilege of seeing him? Was it a punishment? In any event this further tipped the balance of the 'asymmetrical' relationship towards keeping me in a state of disregard.

One of the key problems in the therapy is that the 'relationship' is unequal. The patient is indeed treated as a minor. Jeffrey Masson captures this well when he records a psychiatrist telling a patient "you're the sick one". In reality no one is perfect; everyone has something to learn from someone else. Yet the *structure* of therapy, the Doctor-Patient relationship is such that the Doctor always has the upperhand, is always, or can always be if he chooses, *a priori* right in any dispute. Given that rational mutual dialog is excluded the therapist is under no obligation to respond to queries, criticisms or even doubts. He can always simply respond with a diagnostic remark, putting the patient on the back-foot, reminding them of their status as a patient. Once the patient has been batted down a few times like this he will learn not to keep trying. Here is an example; on one occasion after Redler had said something which I felt was naïve I told him that I thought he looked at the world "through rose-tinted spectacles". He said "I don't think I do". That is - that I think that he does is one of my symptoms. On another occasion when we discussed whether I could get a second grant to attend University despite my telling Leon Redler that this was not possible (I had looked into it) he simply ignored what I told him and said "keep asking; you never know;". This may

have been consistent with a hippie philosophy that there may always be a rainbow round the next corner but it actually undermined my independence and that fact I had already looked into this matter for myself. He simply wasn't interested in that. The underlying reality of course is that if you don't like it you can leave. Once the patient has accepted the role of patient they have lost their footing in terms of a rational relationship between equals. In accepting the role of patient they become Objects. In the case of Redler this effect was reinforced in various ways; his consulting room walls were lined with impressive books about psycho-analysis for example. We have already mentioned the note-taking, above all; by maintaining an attitude of silence as a response to my accounts, at times of quite distressing childhood events he was able to reify me, render me as a passive patient. People approach therapists usually in some form of distress and loneliness. They may not be expecting to be turned into a patient. The problem is that if this is the price for a little attention many people will accept it especially as it comes with a kind of virtue award; every client gets a pat on the back for 'taking responsibility' for their problems. Once the role of patient has been accepted though it is difficult to escape.

Therapy claims to support the patient in making autonomous decisions. The one autonomous decision of course that therapy will not support the patient in is leaving therapy. We have seen how my attempt to engage in a criticism of the Philadelphia Association community household ended with my turning up for more therapy. Indeed after the session I mentioned above when I read my letter of complaint aloud to Redler I again allowed myself to be drawn into therapy and more sessions ensued. With both Redler and his acolyte to whom he referred me later there were several occasions when I mentioned alternatives to therapy which I was exploring: yoga, and the writings of a certain Buddhist teacher with Redler, massage - even friends with his acolyte. On each occasion the therapist adroitly managed to include that in the circle of his therapy - in the case of Redler, or, more crudely in the case of his acolyte simply sabotage them. For example when I mentioned to Leon Redler that I had taken up yoga he at once expressed grave concern; was it safe, was I doing it at a recognized school? Possibly he really does think that yoga is dangerous, but the effect was to undermine my independence; the message was that all of this should be a subject of therapy too. The moral of the tale is the one person not to take your doubts about therapy to is of course your therapist. This gives the lie to the claim of therapy to support you in your autonomous decision making. The sub-text is 'so long as you toe the line'.

Another example of Redler shooting down myself in the act of finding my own way occurred shortly after I started 'seeing' him. I mentioned that I was interested in phenomenology and had been reading Colin Wilson. Redler immediately told me I wouldn't learn anything about phenomenology from Colin Wilson, thus managing to disparage both the writer and my own attempts to enlighten myself in one go. He did not suggest an alternative; it was simply about pulling the rug from under the patient. Of course, Colin Wilson's work does form a useful guide to phenomenology. While he does not perhaps discuss the technical details, much of his writing is steeped in phenomenology; the reader can gain a sense of phenomenology from the flow of the book. Redler, one imagines, had a rather limited perspective: Colin Wilson was not on the list of approved writers. Funnily enough a similar occurrence occurred years later when I was seeing his acolyte. I mentioned to her that I was interested in Heidegger. She pooh-poohed Heidegger in a similar way and recommended Levinas - the favoured author of her mentor Leon Reder. This is really the sort of behaviour that one finds in a cult; limited, afraid of behaviours outside those prescribed by the master, setting a path for the discipline/patient to walk on and undermining them when they walk off it - no doubt feeling that this is how one exercises care for them. So much for the claims of therapy to respect the autonomy and 'choices' of the client/patient.

Leon Redler, as far as is possible to make out from his somewhat spun online CV, has never in fact had a career outside of being a psychotherapist. Indeed it also seems to be the case that as a founding member of a therapy school he has not in fact even been through a training in psychotherapy. Many would question whether informal private sessions with R. D. Laing constitute a training. In the light of this my view that his perspective on the world was naïve stands up. UKCP (the umbrella body for therapists in the UK which is trying to put therapy on a statutory basis) certainly used to recommend that people should become therapists only after a first career in another field; so they would gain maturity and experience. It would appear, from his online CV, that

Leon Redler has never had that.

In as much as I thought that 'seeing' Dr Redler might help me as a young man I envisioned that he would be able to offer me guidance on my most central problem 'what should I do with my life'? That is I thought he might offer me advice; perhaps based partly on getting to know me. There was a gap in my life in this area; my father was a somewhat absent figure. The house-master at my boarding school was a drunk. Leon Redler did not help me with this problem; instead, as I mention above, he instituted family therapy which I had not asked for and which did not help me. With hindsight I think that Leon Redler was simply not capable of helping a gifted but troubled young man with this problem - 'what shall I do with my life?'. He didn't I don't think have much psychological insight into the difficulties of a troubled adolescent and had little experience of the world himself. He offered a kind of emotional cleansing and purification service, a safe imprisonment in minority status; but as a young man I needed friendly, worldly advice from someone who treated me as an equal.

Towards the end of my sojourn here when I think it must have been obvious to Leon Redler that the game was up he referred to 'the way that you use us' of him and his acolyte. It is worth noting that he had referred me to his acolyte describing her as 'highly recommended'. He had also raised his fee for 'using' him. How did he mean that I used him and his acolyte? He didn't tell me; it was left for me to guess. It shows how much I had accepted the objectified role of patient that I didn't simply ask him right then - how do you mean? It seems rather an immature gesture. It 'protects his outside'; it seals me into the role of patient, the one who has a problem, the guilty one (I 'use' him); it, above all, protects his professional position.

There is no doubting that Redler believes in psychotherapy. When his wife went through a difficult patch he, apparently (2), rushed her into psychotherapy. Most normal people though would try to help their partner themselves rather than seeking 'professional' help. Redler seems to have a vision of the world as a dangerous place; yoga is potentially threatening, an emotional upheaval in his wife needs immediate professional help. There is in this vision no tolerance of difficulty. Yes; my family relationship was awkward, but that wasn't, for me, a problem. My concern was more immediate: what shall I do with my life. Nonetheless the problematic family had to be fixed, regardless of the patient's own views. A hippie-ish world where we all love each other and it is all safe and there is no dissonance and there are no rules from authority. Essentially there is a kind of immaturity in this view.

It took me so long to find out, partly because of the way that I allowed myself to be disempowered and turned into a patient, in a standard manoeuvre of psychoanalysis. In part it was simply that having dropped out of University for a while Redler seemed like a last link to that middle-class professional world that I no longer moved in. Above all, by playing the game of psychoanalysis to the hilt, of never giving away anything of himself to the patient, apart from perhaps carefully released titbits which foster the image (such as mention of a trip to Tibet) Leon was able to hide anything about himself which could have led to my changing my perspective. He was a master at the game of giving the patient nothing which could lead to 'resistance'. He held up his seemingly concerned mirror and one (stupidly) fell into the space.

Notes

1. Madness and Civilization. Michel Foucault. Routledge 2001. Chapter 9. (First published in France in 1961)
2. Mad to be Normal. Bob Mullin. Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd 1999