

NOT ANOTHER THEORY

The Wisdom of Not-Knowing. Essays on psychotherapy, Buddhism and life experience, by Bob Chisholm & Jeff Harrison (Ed), Axminster, Devon: Triarchy Press, 2016, paperback, 181 pp, £12.50, ISBN 978-1-909470-91-0

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The Wisdom of Not-Knowing is a collection of 13 essays written by practicing psychotherapists and Buddhists. The book is a refreshing balance of personal, philosophical and theoretical explorations of not-knowing, providing an insightful and stimulating read. The essays are relevant to anyone who grapples with the experience of not-knowing, whether therapists or practising Buddhists. Discussions and explorations of theory and philosophy are accessible and add insight to existing writing around therapy and Buddhism. The personal reflections on either client work or life experience bring the theory and philosophy to life, adding a much-needed sense of humility to psychotherapeutic discourse. The personal accounts do make the book more interesting and it is often a delight to read how others experience this very human stance of not-knowing. The book does justice to the complexity of human experience as well as the complexity of the concept of not-knowing.

The introduction invites us to think how not-knowing can either be seen as a confession of ignorance and helplessness yet it can also be seen as a precursor to moments of rich discovery (p. 7). This is relevant to me as I often feel the tension of not-knowing being perceived as ignorance and yet at the same time being aware of the wisdom that lies in not-knowing. I often wonder how much I am expected to know as a therapist, in terms of life experience, client experience and theoretical ideas and philosophy. How will my ignorance be received

by others? This creates a real tension for me as a psychotherapist. *The Wisdom of Not-Knowing* goes to the heart of this tension. What I appreciate in the book is how it provides a reassuring space where the wisdom of not-knowing is allowed and explored in many different ways without judgement.

Psychotherapist Rosemary Lodge writes about the wisdom of emotions which feels relevant and engaging, especially how she draws out the different kinds of knowledge and knowing. She draws on the ideas of Rogers and Gendlin, who are favourites of mine as they feel very relevant to my experience of client work. There is vulnerability in her writing which I respect. I also appreciate how Caroline Brazier in her chapter challenges the reader to consider how they are as therapists and how much one does allow for uncertainty. It provoked reflection on how far to accept the story my clients bring and how I curiously look for the pain underneath. Her initial sentence ‘In the moment of encounter we do not know’ (p.37) is something which resonates with me as that experience once gave me much anxiety and now often gives me relief. I also aligned myself with her belief in therapy as curiosity, a very useful idea to remember whenever I fall into the trap of thinking that I know. I could also connect with Bob Chisholm’s writing on shame. There is a sense of humanity and compassion which comes through his work with clients. I found Jeff Harrison’s chapter to be the most thought-provoking and dense with exciting ideas. I liked how he draws upon John Welwood’s argument that, ‘when therapists are interested in what they do not know about their clients he is less likely to be manipulative and egotistical himself; and more likely to be an authentic fellow-traveller into mystery and potential’ (p. 80) – a useful warning.

Manu Bazzano’s chapter, ‘Planting an Oak in a Flowerpot’ encourages the ‘therapist as idiot’ stance which most psychotherapists could appreciate. His comparing our clinging to knowing to being lured by the siren of symbolism and all-knowing interpretation reminds me of the importance of humility. Alex Buchan writes about Buddhist philosophy and explores in a

useful way some of the concepts and language around Buddhism. Livingston's story on Ghosts is enjoyable and offers a different perspective on unknowing. I found her sentence, 'a heart can only be at peace when it trusts that that which it needs to know, is not being withheld' (p. 105) moving and touching. Andy Paice takes his experience of both a therapist and a Buddhist and grounds his ideas in that experience, making it a very exciting read. I also enjoyed Paul Christelis' deeply personal and self-reflective chapter –an absorbing story and phenomenological account on his encounter with drugs.

As the editors comment in the introduction, the book shows how not-knowing can reach so many different aspects of one's life experiences. Writers demonstrate that they have 'lived' their ideas and 'lived' unknowing and have experienced and thought about this wisdom in not-knowing. This quality of engagement makes for a book that seems unique to the literature around psychotherapy – neither modelling a perfect way of unknowing, nor turning not-knowing it into a theory.