

On the road with Tom Andersen

By John Soderlund

Tom Andersen, the Norwegian therapist who made a name for himself with the concept of the reflecting team, briefly toured South Africa in March, running workshops in four major centres under the banner of the Family Life Centre of South Africa. New Therapist followed him for two of the stops to hear his gentle words about how carefully he likes to choose his words (see also New Therapist 2, July/August 1999). His primary focus on this, his second wandering through South Africa, was the word "walk", a word with which he says he has a particular affinity. He told of his own professional and philosophical walking of the past few decades and how he plans to turn these words into a new book, recounting the forks he has faced in his long road to becoming one of the most humble and admired therapists the world has seen.

On writing

"I only write if I am asked to write So, when a Norwegian book company said why do you not write any books, I said nobody had asked me to. So they said, 'Then we ask you.'"

Such was the beginning of Tom Andersen's second book, on which he began work some eight years after the first, The Reflecting Team: Dialogues and Dialogues about the Dialogues.

"But I got so bored of my own writing So, I thought writing must be about myself, and suddenly it became less boring."

Andersen says his new book, at its core, is about his own "walk" and the crossroads to which this walking has taken him. "Every once in a while, we come to a point where the road divides and we cannot go both ways. Definitely, I think we choose differently."

Andersen goes on to tell the stories of some of the 20 or so forks he encountered in his own road and how he picked a direction. "Most of the choices I have made have not been rational," he stresses. "If this turns out to be a book and somebody reads it, they could think about how their own road divides and how they choose [which way to go] Every person should write his or her own book because what we come up with as professional attitudes, theories and standpoints are very personal."

The either/or, both/and fork

One of the most significant roads was a decision about his relationship with orthodox psychiatry. "There was a feeling I should not continue on the routine road of psychiatry," he recalls, recounting a sharp break he made with the psychiatric practice of diagnosis and labelling which insists its patients can be described immutably and completely by their diagnoses.

"No person is like this or like that. People change all the time Psychiatrists like certain stories to be told. They like to learn about all the incompetencies, all the failures," he says, recalling how he elected a fork in the road which took him away from the psychiatric approach in which he had been schooled.

"With the introduction of family therapy in the 70's came the ideas of context and time. So, the road divide was either/or or both/and. Either/or is a tough road which invites disagreements." The either/or, says Andersen was to oppose mainstream psychiatry with an alternative approach which would threaten to replace it. The both/and approach, by contrast, would adopt the view that, in addition to what psychiatry had to offer, there was another perspective based in different assumptions. "Heraclites didn't write much, but he did say that in life there are always two opposite tendencies happening simultaneously which create balance," he adds, informing his choice of the both/and fork.

On physiotherapy, psychotherapy, pain and breathing

Tom Andersen has long spoken of his fondness for and work with physiotherapists using essential physiotherapeutic principles for accessing emotional material. The core idea, he says is to understand that there are two groups of muscles, those responsible for extending or opening joints and those which retract or close joints.

"When feelings become too overwhelming, bending muscles become dominant When a physiotherapist grabs a retracted muscle and squeezes it, this [pain] produces an inhalation. If the exhalation comes as a sigh, it's a good thing In psychotherapy, our questions are like a pain-producing hand," he says. If they are not unusual enough, they produce no pain. If they are too unusual, they stop the conversation. But if they are unusual enough, they produce an inhalation which is followed by an exhalation, an expression that can be healing.

The open talk fork

The road divide for which Tom is probably best known is that of the reflecting team, a core concept expounded in his 1991 book The Reflecting Team: Dialogues and Dialogues about the Dialogues, which has now been translated into dozens of languages and is widely regarded as essential reading for family therapists.

Tom talks of the birth of this reflecting team concept as the day of open talks

"This was a very significant day, the day of open talks," he recalls, telling how he and a group of colleagues were observing a family therapy session one day in the basement of a building, when it occurred to him that the family may be interested to know what was being said about them in the adjoining observation room. After discussing the idea with his fellow-observers, Andersen switched off the lights in the therapy room and switched them on in the observation room, making the family invisible to the observers and the observers plainly visible to the family for the first time. The observers then began to discuss, in full view of the family, what they thought about what they had observed. It struck Tom how naked he felt being observed by an invisible family whose discussions about his discussions he could only guess at.

On starting a session

One of my first questions is 'How would you like to use this meeting?' If I say 'What would you like to talk about,' the implication is that this is place for work, not rest. If I say 'What problem would you like to discuss?' I implicitly assume that this is not a place for successes."

On bonds and Chico, the King Poodle

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