

Dancing towards solutions

Guy Shennan

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The rhythmic approach is to start by turning things upside down, and taking power -

Jocelyn Chaplin

Movement is my medicine, my meditation, my metaphor and my method - Gabrielle Roth

Dance, Dance, Dance (Yowsah, Yowsah, Yowsah) - Chic

And those who were seen dancing, were thought to be crazy, by those who could not hear the music - Friedrich Nietzsche

As 2011 turned into 2012, and I was further north in the British Isles than I had ever been before, my world was turning upside down, as my body was tumbling around, with fifty other people, within a Universal Hall¹. For six days, spanning the end of the old year and the beginning of the new, I flowed, shook, twisted and turned, stepped and stamped, swayed, sweated and played, all the while talking very little, and ended up having one of the most powerful therapeutic experiences of my life. I was taking part in Brand New, a new year workshop organised by a company called Bodysurf Scotland and facilitated by Deborah Jay-Lewin and Adam Barley, which utilised a dance movement practice known as the 5Rhythms® (Roth, 1997).

A few months earlier at the annual European Brief Therapy Association conference in the beautiful old German city of Dresden, I had taken part in a workshop called “Selfcare -

¹ The Universal Hall is a rather amazing pentagonal-shaped building at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, where the workshop described here took place.

Burnout prevention - with Elements of Biodanza”, run by a smiling Austrian woman called Marianne Bredow. Whilst elsewhere conference attendees sat in workshops, listening and talking, talking and listening, or perhaps just sitting, in Marianne’s workshop we held hands, closed our eyes and moved together, now taking some steps a little awkwardly, then moving smoothly, then with our eyes open, and smiling all the time, smiling for virtually the whole workshop. There was little talking and next to no explanation by Marianne, and there was more communication and connection between me and the other participants than I have known at virtually any other workshop I had been to before. We had been engaging in a little Biodanza (Roulin, 2009), which works by combining music, movement and the interaction between the members of the group and, according to Marianne, is solution-focused “because it works with what is, (enabling) everyone to see his or her own resources and to realize their potential”².

The very next day, I learned later, at the annual conference of the UK Association of Family Therapy, in the beautiful old English spa town of Buxton, there had been another workshop where people had danced rather than talked. *Mindstep* was run by Caitlin Watson and Natalie Alleyne, dancers and systemic practitioners, and the participants - though nervous perhaps about the expectation of dancing together - found when they danced that they were “connecting with Michael White’s ideas”³, and that “dance holds narrated meaning” (Glenister, 2012).

And now perhaps I could claim that a quiet revolution is taking place, in which dancing is taking the place of talking, but that would be to overstate matters a little. At the very least though, these experiences, taking place in little more than a three month period, are suggestive. If it is not the case that something **MUST** be going on, within the world of

² From Marianne’s workshop abstract in the conference programme.

³ Michael White developed narrative therapy, an influential approach within the systemic therapy world (White, 2007)

therapy in general and the worlds of solution-focused and systemic therapies in particular, then at least something MIGHT be going on. There are possibilities.

One thing that I can say with a degree of Cartesian certainty⁴ is that in my world there is something going on. In 1983, I left university with my degree in mathematics and, heading into social care and later social work and solution-focused therapy (de Shazer, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994), stepped out of a world of numbers into a world of words. Since that time my working life has been about working with people and helping them to change, through talking. I have talked with others professionally for almost thirty years and the irony is that although the intention has been a dynamic one, of facilitating movement and change, the means have been more-or-less static, at least on a physical level. And the more I have moved into the world of pure psychotherapy, away for example from the messiness of social work, the more static it has become. As therapist and client we sit in our chairs, and may as well be nearly disembodied, two almost purely Cartesian “thinking things”, just needing sufficient physical apparatus to allow the talking to take place. And despite the best efforts of those anxious to establish solution-focused therapy as a new paradigm, distant in particular from the psychodynamic, we are surely continuing in the tradition of Breuer and Freud and their “talking cure”⁵, developed within a Western world still under the sway of Cartesian dualist thinking, in which the mind is elevated over the body (Chaplin, 1988, p6). And accompanying the elevation of the mind within these imperialist European cultures was a suspicion of practices involving the body, and a belief that rhythmic beats should be played only on distant drums, in faraway countries. There was indeed little chance of these civilised men developing a dancing cure.

⁴ I dance therefore I am?

⁵ This name, the talking cure, actually being suggested by Bertha Pappenheim, the patient of Freud and Breuer known as Anna O - see their *Studies on Hysteria*, 1895.

In the past three years I have caught a glimpse of change and seen the possibilities of the first significant shift in my own practice since falling in love with the solution-focused approach back in the 1990s⁶. I first danced the 5Rhythms in October 2009, at a Buddhist retreat centre, just south of London, and was immediately taken by the practice. It so happens that I was introduced to it by another solution-focused practitioner, and though it took me a while to see connections between the two practices, once I did they were clear enough. Notwithstanding the terminology of attending a 5Rhythms *class*, run by a *teacher*, there are no steps to learn and no didactic instruction given. The movement is free, and freeing. At the outset therefore, one can be stuck and self-conscious and not know how to begin, just as a client of a solution-focused therapist may be faced by the challenge of the question, “What are your best hopes from this?” In both situations there is *nowhere to run*, *nowhere to hide*, an answer has to be voiced, a movement has to be made - or why would the client/dancer have shown up in the first place?

Then once a movement has been made, it is liberating to discover that one can move however one wishes to. Anyone can dance at a 5Rhythms class, as the dancing is done entirely within one’s own abilities. Jocelyn Chaplin has captured the experience well when writing about dancing at raves. At first self-consciousness and a feeling that others are “better” could get in the way, but then “those tiresome inner hierarchies were soon dissolved in the beats that took me over” and it was exhilarating to realise that “everyone was just dancing in their own way” (Chaplin, 2008, p59). I am no expert in the theory of the 5Rhythms, and in why the particular rhythms that are always followed - known as Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical and Stillness - can work the magic that they do. But my experience has been that once I start to move, to find and allow the subsequent movements that my body wants to make, and open myself to be supported, energised and

⁶ I had had the faintest glimmerings of solution-focused brief therapy in the 1980s, tried to do it by reading a book in the early 1990s, and finally fell for it on an introductory course with Chris Iveson of BRIEF in 1995.

influenced by others in the group, by their movements and reactions towards me, then shifts can and do take place, in my mood, outlook and state of mind.

I started going to a local 5Rhythms class every Sunday evening and the dancing regularly felt helpful in and of itself, which - expert or not in any theory - should not be surprising in any case given what we know about the importance and usefulness of exercise and also of social activity. It was almost a year after my introduction to the practice at the Buddhist retreat centre before I began to consider the possibility that a solution-focused approach could be added usefully into the mix. John Shotter (2012) appeared to offer support to the thrust of this paper when, rephrasing Kant's maxim to take account of language, said that "wording without experience is empty". But, in keeping with Kant, he went on to add, "experience without wording is blind". As is so often the case it is "both/and", the likelihood being that dancing and talking together can be greater than the sum of their parts. At the end of each 5Rhythms class, there is indeed a space for talking, as we sit or stand in a circle and anyone can say anything they feel moved to say. There was a particular moment in one Sunday evening circle, when, though I no longer recall what was being said or not said, I was struck suddenly by the thought that solution-focused questions might be just what were needed.

And from this pivotal moment onwards it started to seem obvious that there would be ways of incorporating solution-focused ideas and practices into the 5Rhythms, and of course since having had that thought, ways in which this was already being done began to present themselves to me. For example, at the Brand New 11-12 workshop we were invited to write about what we wanted for ourselves in 2012, and to narrow this down to three specific intentions. We were then invited to embody these intentions by choosing a physical movement for each of them in turn. As each of us embodied our intentions we had two supporters who observed and shared our movements, recreating them as closely and as faithfully as possible, just as a solution-focused practitioner would seek to echo her

client's precise words and not paraphrase them. And then - as experience without wording might become empty - we were invited to add words back in, voicing a word or phrase while making the movement. It is now April, and I am still alive to my three intentions, which I remember and experience physically as well as mentally.

My first 5Rhythms experience had involved a mixture of dancing and meditation, with only a small amount of talking during the weekend as a means of "processing" the experience. My second, at the beginning of 2010, had been another new year workshop, in which dancing and talking or writing exercises alternated, and I have since attended other weekend workshops structured in similar ways. One particularly powerful experience was a combination of dancing and work using the family constellations model (Schneider, 2007). So it would appear to be quite a straightforward task to combine dancing and exercises in which participants' thinking and talking are influenced by solution-focused questions, to alternate between the two. It is simply the specifics that need working out.

Another step beyond this would be to implant a solution-focused approach further into the movement and dance itself. During a 5Rhythms class the teacher occasionally talks to the dancers, for example directing their attention to the different parts of their bodies, or inviting them to link up with a partner and be in some way influenced by the other's dance. A solution-focused 5Rhythms teacher, having invited the members of a workshop to consider their hopes from that workshop, could then invite the embodiment of the members' preferred futures, by suggesting that they *dance as if those hopes had been realised*. Dance partners could witness these embodied futures, and provide appreciative feedback in a variety of ways, all of which I have experienced over the past two years at 5Rhythms workshops. Partners can write down and share words that the movements have suggested, talk to the dancer about what they witnessed, or reflect back by moving as they saw the dancer move.

Existing progress towards preferred futures can be danced and embodied too. In her fascinating account of dance and the body in psychotherapy, the movement therapist Tina Stromsted reports a 'personal communication' by Stanley Keleman, "I have embodied my encounters with the world and they have left their mark" (1998, p157). If, as has also been said, "the body remembers" (Whitehouse, 1995, p242), it should be possible to move again as one moved in encounters with the world which fitted with a desired direction in life. And for those times when life makes it hard to continue in that direction we can listen again to Stromsted, who, drawing again upon another's wisdom, had "come to appreciate the beauty of what Don Johnson calls the "somatic genius" of each person's way of coping with enormous challenges" (1998, p157).

So we can move in ways which fit with how we want to be, and we can move in ways which represent, evoke and embody what we are already achieving. There are other ways too in which our bodies can be included in our prefigurings and representations of change. In solution-focused therapy it is the client's life that is seen as central, and not the therapy, which simply consists of talk *about* life, talk *about* changes. Talk is a vehicle, a means, not an end, and there are many other means, many other ways to communicate about and represent one's life and the changes in one's life. As well as moving and dancing, there are other body-focused, somatic therapies and techniques, suggestive of possibilities for integrating a solution-focused approach, though there is not the space to consider them here, even if I had the experience to do so⁷.

One technique that I will mention however is the Focusing method of Eugene Gendlin (1978), which I have recently experienced when in the "client" role in a current co-coaching relationship. We have consciously brought a physical element into this relationship

⁷ In the past year I have had direct experience (as a student and 'client') of the Skinner-Releasing Technique and the Rosen Method, sufficient to suggest possibilities as mentioned, but insufficient as yet to do either the techniques or the possibilities justice.

alongside our solution-focused talking⁸. And I shall bring this exploratory piece to an end by recounting a most exploratory bit of physical solution-focused work, through the very words that are to follow. I was most of the way through a first draft of what you are reading now when I met Rob for one of our monthly sessions. In the previous session I had described myself - and in very physical ways - writing “well”, and, finding myself keen to show Rob some of the fruits of my description, I had taken out and switched on my laptop. Following his “misunderstanding”⁹ of Gendlin’s Focusing technique, Rob asked me, before I talked about it, to focus on the “felt sense” of my writing, its bodily-felt sensations, or as John Shotter (2012) put it, “the experience before the wording”. I found myself staring at the laptop screen, and the parts of my body that I was focusing on were my eyes and my hands. I was focusing too on the interaction between my eyes and the screen, and as I was telling Rob this, I said something that prompted Rob to invite me to write, there and then. And this is what I wrote:

“I am writing this, this very second, I am hitting the keys to write these very words at the suggestion of my coach after I brought my writing to our session, and he has just asked me to experience the felt sense of my writing, and it is flowing, and I am enjoying it. Where do I feel it? He has asked me where I felt it in my body, and it is in my eyes, and in the lines of my face as I smile, and it is in the uprightness of my body, and it is in the interaction of my eyes and my body and the screen of my laptop.”

I look forward to writing the second part of this paper (and to the physical act of writing it), when I will be able to report on how a number of the possibilities aired here were converted into action.

⁸ In fact, it was partly the discovery that we had both become interested in incorporating the body and physical movement into our work that led to us wanting to work together. My “co-coach” is Rob Rave, and much respect to you, Rob.

⁹ Used here as Steve de Shazer used the term (see, for example, 1991, p67-70)

To extend a definition of Steve de Shazer's just a little, "Therapy is nothing but a bunch of talk, and movement".

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Suggestions for further reading

There are many websites and YouTube videos where further information on the 5Rhythms can be found. I would recommend going straight to the originator of the practice, at

www.gabrielleroth.com and I would also recommend the inspiring www.5rro.org

I also recommend finding out more about Jocelyn Chaplin's thinking around life as rhythm, from her book *Deep Equality* in particular and from her website www.serpentinstitute.com

Eugene Gendlin's 1978 book on his Focusing approach is simply written, compelling and immediately useful. His website is at www.focusing.org

Google searches will take you to many other places to read about the practices mentioned in the paper.

For information about solution-focused brief therapy and solution focused practice, and about training in the approach, visit my website at www.sfpractice.co.uk

Information about the author

Guy Shennan is an independent therapist, consultant and trainer, specialising in the solution focused approach to therapy, coaching and organisational change. His contact details are as follows:

Guy Shennan Associates

36 Shepton Houses

Welwyn Street

London E2 0JN

guyshennan@sfpractice.co.uk

www.sfpractice.co.uk

www.facebook.com/guyshennanassociates

020 8980 9630

07795 176356