

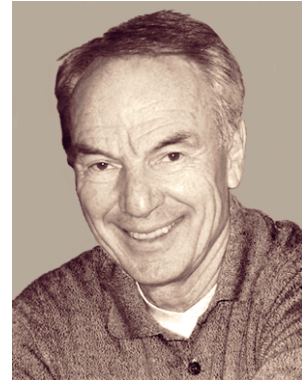
An interview with Brad Brown

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John Horder

This interview was originally conducted for *Resurgence* magazine by John Horder, writer, poet and critic. It offers a general background to the programme at a time when it was beginning to be offered in the UK.



Brad Brown

JH: I have always thought that we British have a problem with I call 'bottled-up anger'. Can you say something about how More To Life helps people to handle suppressed negativity?

KBB: I suppose it depends what you mean by 'handle' it. People on both sides of the Atlantic handle negativity quite well by not expressing it too overtly. If we are not actually shouting or being violent, then we tend to think that we are handling our anger. In fact much of our anger is expressed surreptitiously by being resentful, for example – holding on to ill-will against people over time, not treating people with much respect but withdrawing, or just not being very supportive to them in their lives. This is so familiar and it is actually an expression of anger, but since it is not overt it does not look like anything that anybody could criticise. We do not get criticised for 'handling' our anger in this way, which is why we do it so much in our culture.

Of course there are people who handle anger by blowing off steam all over the place. They tend to get institutionalised in some way, or just quietly shunned. Anger has to be stuffed away somehow, so it 'leaks out' in socially sanctioned forms of resentment or hostility.

One of the things we try to do in our programme is help people connect with their feelings, and what is interesting to see is that most people are not very good at identifying feelings at all. We say *“I feel you shouldn’t have done this...”* or *“I feel you shouldn’t have done that”* and we may even say it angrily, but we are not really owning what we feel.

For example, we don’t say: *“I feel angry with you because you didn’t keep an agreement we made about when you would arrive”*. Instead we might say, *“well, that certainly took some time!”* Or: *“I notice we are starting a little late...”* and that is the extent of the anger! We have developed ways to help people identify when they are angry and not dealing with it, because the effect is to keep getting into opposition with others, never having the truly creative relationships we would all probably like to have, because our anger is always just ‘leaking out’.

JH: I know that in my case bottled-up anger gets manifested in problems with my stomach.

KBB: Exactly. Emotions are physical, and just knowing this is a big discovery for a lot of people. They don’t know anger as a physical sensation, all they know is that something inside their head is buzzing, there is a kind of irritation there, and there is something coming out of their mouths, that is the best they can do. And what is coming out of their mouths they think is the anger! Normally we choose not to notice if we’re angry either with other people, or with ourselves. In fact our lives might have been designed to avoid noticing what we are feeling.

But I think that almost everyone I’ve ever talked to about this has observed how the same sorts of thing keeps coming up over and over again in one’s life, even without our getting the point. *‘Now that’s strange, there that is again!’* We are aware there is something that keeps recapitulating itself, and we may even have the thought that what happen in our lives is not accidental. It’s almost as if life was trying to tell you something. We have that phrase in the language, people say, *‘do you think life is trying to tell you something?’* And indeed I do think life is trying to tell us something.

When I look back on my own life I see certain significant events which took place, and to the extent that I was able to respond to them, say “yes” to them, the course of my life was altered. I was never the same afterwards: my life had an entirely new direction as a result.

A dramatic example was something that happened to me when I was called up to serve in the Vietnam War. I was 22 years old, married and in business, and I was called up, and everything in my life was thrown into bold perspective. Suddenly I was away from home, from my children, and it looked like my business would collapse because I wasn't there. I found myself being thrust into an incredible re-evaluation of my whole way of life. The dislocation of what was happening to me set in motion a kind of spiritual experience, in which I sensed once again that my life was really about service, and not about the way I had been setting it up, about satisfying my own personal ambitions. My life after that was unalterably changed by this whole experience.

You can think of events like that in two ways. They may be saying something to you about life that you hadn't seen before, or they may be saying something to you about yourself that you hadn't recognised. Either way, the key is that there is a confrontation with reality, with how life actually is, and this is juxtaposed with how you expected things to be at that particular moment. When those two particular realities come into opposition, when there is a lack of alignment between our reality and the reality of life itself, there is going to be a kind of shock to the system – we call them “lifeshocks” and basically the message is always “course-correct! Get your thinking into alignment with what is so!” If we do not happen to be living in alignment with what is so, then we will keep finding ourselves in some form of opposition, and it tends to be stressful to maintain ourselves in opposition, in fact it causes a lot of pain and unnecessary suffering.

Lifeshocks offer us the chance to make corrections about our perceptions, and our self-perception. For example I may think I'm big and strong and capable of handling anything life throws at me until I get to a certain place and life seems to be saying: *“you're not as big and strong as you think, at times you are weak and you don't have all the answers.”* Conversely maybe I am saying to myself, *“life is basically just terrible and awful”* and then it showers me with all kinds of generosity – what is being required is that you change your opinions.

There are also things we need to learn about others. You may think that people are basically here to serve your needs, but then you discover your needs aren't being served, people aren't doing it. There's a course correction to get there – you may be involved in some kind of interdependence you hadn't noticed, or acted upon. Or you may have a lot of ideas about things you say you believe, but when it comes to practicing them you are operating according to a whole set of different ideas, to which you are not paying any attention.

Life may be saying: “*notice what your real ideas, beliefs and goals actually are*”, because that is what you’re acting on, and you can talk about loving your neighbour all day long while you are kicking your neighbour or throwing stuff in his backyard, or doing whatever else belies your so-called beliefs. Your behaviour belies your beliefs, and at some point you are required to “shape up”. We all know about this.

The big question is how? How do we get the message, how do we shape up? And in a way this is just a technical problem. Our own inner dialogue holds the answer, but we seldom noticed this either. We are so immersed in what we are doing, and so attached to what we think we need to do to get the results we think we need to have, that we have little or no self-observation. We don’t stop to think about what we are thinking. In fact we rarely examine our own thoughts about anything: if we have a thought we think it’s true, because we thought it.

What I call “mindtalk” is the kind of subliminal internal conversation we have about things, usually without ever noticing it is going on. To take the example of anger: something happens and you immediately feel angry without noticing that there is any internal dialogue involved – but it is mindtalk that actually generates your anger. “*I shouldn’t have been treated that way!*” is what you get, like it’s a fact. You don’t hear yourself saying “*I shouldn’t have been treated that way*” because mindtalk is normally unnoticed and below the level of our conscious attention.

So More To Life tools offer what is, in my opinion, a huge leap forward in terms of psychotherapeutic practice: you get to put the lifeshock moment and the unnoticed mindtalk together in the same process. What I have found is that if you re-experience a specific lifeshock moment, and allow yourself to feel the emotion and notice what is going on in your mind, then you will immediately catch your mindtalk at work.

Freud tried many ways to help people bring out their underlying mindtalk, in the early days for example by doing free association. Fritz Perls got at it by having people create conversations with different parts of themselves. Hypnotists do it with hypnosis. Some, like Carl Rogers, have it come up by holding the individual in such unconditional positive regard that it just slowly unfolds from out of the relationship between them and their therapist. The underlying considerations that are supporting their feelings emerge, and if the therapist is sharp enough, they can bring it up and illuminate it for them.

What we do offers a shortcut. It is a way of reliving the lifeshock moment, which automatically and immediately brings up the emotional content, and the moment you are connected with the emotion, the mindtalk is just sitting there waiting to be heard. You don't have to have a therapist around to get there. This puts the responsibility for your life squarely in your own hands. You can start to take radical responsibility for your own thinking, and notice that quite often the thinking you do is creating a lot of turmoil in your life, not to mention a lot of negative emotions, and you can choose to do something about it – or you can choose to just continue to suffer.

Once you have the mindtalk, if you know how to get hold of the truth of the matter at that point, you can literally change your feelings, along with your whole point of view, even your direction in life. And the exciting thing about this is that it doesn't require you to do therapy: these are simple, everyday mental health exercises. I hope that some day the techniques that we are teaching will be available to everyone, like brushing your teeth. They are that simple, and that helpful.

JH: Can you remember the moment when it came together for you in this way?

KBB: I look back and remember how Roy Whitten and I created the first outlines for these courses, and it was like the material was just waiting for us. We had been carrying it out in our own professional lives, although we didn't fully understand the process of it. As a therapist I had been doing this with people for many years but Roy and I decided to label it. For example, I learned a long time ago about the concept of transderivation. This means that at a particular point in time, something that is happening right now will remind your mind of something that has happened in the past. The past will be brought back into the present in a process of mild trance, so the past recapitulates itself.

This is classic stimulus/ response theory. And the lifeshock is in effect, the stimulus. So, when we re-experience the lifeshock we are able to catch a whole series of things that are going on. Roy's genius was a kind of "let's look at this in steps", and doing that came from a willingness to trust each other to communicate and talk about our personal experiences. And of course the whole idea behind More To Life is that 'one and one is more than two' – that the whole is far, far greater than the sum of the parts.

JH: I think that a real sharing of feelings is not all that common in this country, and this sharing of feelings is what makes the course such a deeply moving experience.

KBB: Well as we have said, having ‘negative’ feelings puts us in a double-bind – you’re not supposed to have negative feelings or show negativity, so we hardly know how to describe them. We are too busy trying to hide them and not talk about them and not share them so we can stop them from affecting anybody. The same is true with ‘positive’ feelings: you are perceived as being naïve, or unsophisticated, or improper, or inappropriate or whatever, so we don’t have language for the very feelings which would otherwise use to describe a life filled with enthusiasm, filled with aliveness.

We have very little awareness about feelings either way. Most often we describe something as a “feeling” without realizing it is actually just an opinion being expressed as a “feeling”. We seldom grasp that real feelings are physical, that they are expressed in sensations that are actually felt by the body. I think most people don’t even know that is so. But they can talk about it, and one of the things the programme does is to attempt to give people a working relationship with their feelings. To help people to identify them, and have a language that will hold them.

JH: There’s a real head and heart connection in the course, and it is exciting to see this as a logical progression. I call it a ripple effect, the generation of warm loveable energy, which was my experience of the course. It is very exciting to take part in this and it shows how highly infectious loveable energy is, once the barnacles have been cleared away.

KBB: One thing that is special about the experience of a More To Life course is you get an opportunity to practice being with other people and see them as real, as really human, and respond to them according to that. You get a chance to practice. In a way it’s about practicing living as part of a community, as opposed to hiding. And that’s a political purpose, from my point of view. I sincerely hope that something will eventually grow out of this programme that will make a big impact on our society as a whole. I am up for changing people’s minds and creating a new context for the world to be together on one planet. I want my life to have mattered to people. I have a big intention to make a difference to the quality of life on our planet. I want that a lot. I think of myself as a spiritual warrior – and I want to see this programme offering an effective tool that can help people to live their lives.