

On Faith and Nihilism: A considerable relationship

Dave Mearns

During my service of confirmation in All Saints Episcopal Church in Glasgow in 1962 I became an atheist. I remember that it was a very clear, personal decision. Such a service is intended to focus our attention on what we are saying and doing and that focusing process helped me to hear my whole self, not only my body, *talking back*. I felt grateful for the openness of that process and I knew that I had been considerably strengthened by it. That strengthening was to be both tested and also supported by numerous experiences to come. That is what this paper is about – the effects of a personal commitment, no matter the nature of that commitment.

My first test came six weeks after confirmation when I met the vicar in the street. He was of a ‘high Church’ vintage, and, unusually for Glasgow, he walked the streets in back robes and not just dog collar. As altar boys we had tended to prefer when a high Church vicar was in post, because there were more interesting things to do – contrasted with the fact that the last ‘low Church’ vicar had an inclination towards corporal punishment in the Sunday school. I nodded and smiled at the vicar who stopped me and asked me why I had not been at Church since confirmation. ‘I’ve joined a golf club and it’s great to go there on Saturdays and Sundays.’ Now, this was not a lie. At a ‘presentational’ level it really was my main motivation for not going to Church. Of course there was also the deeper existential basis, but, hell, that was a bit deep for a street meeting. As I told the vicar about my golf club I thought that he would share my joy – a bit naïve perhaps, but I had always got on well with him. He did not respond in that way, but he did ask me a question that proved profound. I suspect he was being sarcastic when he asked: ‘Do you put golf before God?’ with a disdainful

emphasis on the first 'G' word. Again, for someone who had just won a powerful existential clarity, this was a great question to treat seriously even if that was not how it was being offered because I was able to look into my heart and answer him simply and without fear. 'Yes', I said. I thought we would talk some more, but he swept his robes up, and strode quickly away. I never saw him again, but since that time I was privileged to meet many other men of religion who would influence my life, not to me through their faith, but through their profound integrity.

Being clear in my lack of religious faith allowed me to be open to much of the good work the Church was doing. When we are even a little unsure of our own position, we tend to behave defensively and we cannot allow ourselves to go on to 'the other ground' lest we become further conflicted. Alternatively, when we are sure of our own position, we can reach out to the other. I became involved in running a Church youth club, soon taking sole responsibility for the Monday evening indoor football involving 50 boys in a basement church hall. An incident comes particularly to mind as the kind of 'meeting of persons' that I so value. One Monday I was visited in the basement by the leader of the Partick Cross gang, along with his four henchmen. I knew of this 17-year-old young man only from his reputation for indiscriminate violence, though I also knew that such reputations tended to be inflated by all parties. When he entered, the usual deafening noise of boys became an equally challenging silence. He stroked back his ginger hair, looked me straight in the eye and paused before speaking. I liked that – this was an interesting man. I suppose that I was so interested that I forgot to think of the fact that this pre-fire regulations basement had only one entrance/exit and Ginger plus henchmen were between me and it. 'I have had a complaint about you from one of my boys', said Ginger. When he says 'one of my boys' he is referring to the fact that in gangland Glasgow of that era, there were layers of age-grouped gangs – there was the elder 'Partick Cross', the 'Young Cross', the 'Young Young Cross' and even the 'Tiny Cross'. Ginger went on, 'He says that you threw him out last week and beat him up'. 'That must be Ritchie', I said. 'Yes, I threw him out – he completely lost the place – but I didn't touch him'. I shared his respect by also looking him straight in the eye as I spoke. I added, 'Check with the other boys'. Ginger did

that over the next ten minutes, then he came back to me. 'I want to apologise to you. The story I was told was completely wrong.' He made to leave, then paused and came back. 'I want to thank you for the great work you are doing with the boys.' I nodded, in silent appreciation of this young man's gravitas. As he left, one of his henchmen grabbed poor Ritchie.

I told this story in the published Mary Kilborn lecture (Mearns, 2006) in the University of Strathclyde at the conference to mark my retirement. I also added mention of the two subsequent occasions that I met Ginger. One was about seven years later when he turned up in one of my lectures to one-year graduate students training for secondary school teaching. We spotted and recognised each other simultaneously. Ginger winked at me, partly in recognition and partly to say, 'Let's keep the past quiet'. Ten years after that I met him at a conference for head teachers. This time I winked at him. People of integrity, like Ginger, can be met anywhere, if we are open to meeting them.

During my university days I had the unusual experience of living for some years with a particularly strong group of men, the majority of whom were divinity students. The context was 'The Monastery' – a small Glasgow University residence above the Church of Scotland Chaplaincy Centre at 65 Oakfield Avenue. I mention the address because, interestingly, it is now the site of the university Student Counselling Service.

There were six divinity students and four of us 'others'. There was Andy McLennan, later to become Moderator of the Church of Scotland, and after that to do commendable work in the tough role as Scottish Inspector of Prisons. There was Gus McDonald from Skye – a student of History and later head teacher who was recognised throughout his career as a man of integrity. And there was my particular favourite, Bob Brown, who later worked his heart out in parishes in the east end of Glasgow and Aberdeen. In fact, though he never knew it and we rarely met after Monastery days, Bob's integrity was a touchstone for me through most of my working life. There was also John Carrie, who so sensitively came to my room to tell me that my parents had been in a car accident and that my mother was dead. I loved these men of religion and I still do. Their integrity has been with me throughout my life.

During this time, unlike the typical student of Maths and Physics, I began to read some of the radical theology of the 1960s, like Hamilton and Altizer (1968) and Bishop John Robinson (1963), as well as earlier works by Buber (1958) and Bonhoeffer. In regard to the last mentioned I first made the mistake of attempting to read his *Ethics* (1955) rather than the intended *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1953). Anyone who knows the former work will sympathise with this poor science student.

One of the privileges of life in the Monastery was the fact that we attracted an interesting set of visitors. For example, we had visits from the Roman Catholic Chaplain, a Jesuit called Father Hughes. Wow – his was a powerful combination of intelligence and compassion. Then there was Professor Willie Barclay, who believed that theology could be written to be accessible to everyone, as in his *A Beginner's Guide to the New Testament* (see 1992 edition). His books sold better than those of other professors of divinity, but some colleagues seemed to treat his work with disdain, purely because he wrote in everyday language. When he visited I would listen intently – I also read some of his work – this man had something important for me. Now, 40 years later, I see his importance to me in every book I have written. It is perfectly possible to write in language that can be widely understood, and much of the opposite is the author's vain attempt to prove to themselves that they are smart. Willie Barclay was a welcome visitor to us young ones, but he was also an old man – we would watch him closely to note the point in the evening when he would slip his hand into his waistcoat to turn off his hearing aid and retreat into slumber!

The same university period found me involved in the Student Christian Movement (SCM). This organisation had evolved beyond its name and was, in fact, a broad collection of Christians, agnostics (I have never understood the designation) and atheists all sharing an interest in human encounter. Indeed, we ran what, in the USA, would have been called 'Encounter Groups' every lunch time from Monday to Friday. The SCM had a designated place on the steering committee of the Scottish Christian Youth Assembly (SCYA). I became that representative immediately following David Lunan, another considerable influence of integrity in my life and also later to become Moderator. Once again, in my way of thinking, the SCYA

was an example of the Church doing something worthwhile. Every year it gathered 1,000 young people together for a weekend of dialogue in the Assembly Halls in Edinburgh. I served just over two years of my three-year term on the committee, being elected to be Chair in my third year. Now, it had never been a secret that I was atheist – but it didn't seem to be important – it was only important that we shared the same goals. But then I came in touch with elements in the wider world of religion. I received a total of 13 anonymous 'poison pen' letters. I can remember some of the language and it still feels frightening. I resigned, claiming pressure of work in my finals year, and remembered that the Church contains a frighteningly broad group of people. But that was not new to me – I had also exited from ultra left-wing politics when I realised that some of my colleagues would be willing to enforce their beliefs on others through violence. Any time we unite over what we believe in we need to remember that it can also be a home for collective pathology.

In the past 40 years I have had no sustained relationships with the Church and its agencies, though recently I have enjoyed just a little contact with military chaplains. I was amused to find that military chaplains from the different denominations seem to work well together with no hint of prejudicial feelings towards each other. Those prejudicial feelings are reserved for relations between the services – basically, everyone hates the Air Force! In the residential context of the conference I found myself talking quite closely with some of the chaplains. With a couple, their crisis was one of faith set in a military context, and with some others the challenge was to translate their faith into something that would be meaningful for the men and women whom they accompanied to war. Interestingly, these challenges are pretty familiar to counsellors who take their profession seriously.

One young chaplain was particularly curious about my atheism. It seemed to be a completely new experience to him to hear his faith respected and also to have dialogue about it at its depths, with someone who did not share it in any way. 'But you *behave* like a Christian!' he blurted out at one time. We then examined what he was observing in my behaviour and I openly told him how each part was linked to my secular humanism. I stopped short of offering him a treatise on existential nihilism, but I completely blew his

mind with a story of a former client who, despite the fact that he knew I was an atheist, had asked me to pray with him, and I had done that. I hope that our encounter will help him in his own aim to be able to meet a wide range of humanity at some personal depth.

Having mentioned nihilism, I suppose I had better deal with it. I rarely go into this fundamental part of my grounding because many people, especially many religious people, have considerable preconceptions about nihilism – often being somewhat naïve but judgmental of it in others and afraid of any sense of it in themselves. I will give a brief account of my own concept of existential nihilism without showing the work and the pain that have led me there. To do that would radically deflect from the thread of this paper and it probably would not be able to return.

Arguably the most accessible modern philosopher of nihilism is Carlos Castaneda, through the words of his main character, a Yaqui sorcerer, Don Juan Matus in *A Separate Reality* (Castaneda, 1971) and other books. Castaneda maintained that Don Juan was real and that he had had tutelage with him over some years. Others debate the veracity of this provenance, but they miss the point, because Castaneda's supreme irony is that it whether Don Juan was real or not really does not matter! Especially heuristic is Don Juan's concept of *The Controlled Folly*. In seeking to learn from Don Juan, Castaneda's challenge is to let go his past and the way that constrains his perception in the present. This is what Carl Rogers was about. He argued that our behaviour in the present was not *caused* by our experiences in the past, but that such past history could shape the way we *perceived* our present (Rogers, 1951, pp. 491–2). Don Juan assisted the process of 'letting-go' with liberal use of peyote, but that is probably only compulsory in California and should not detract from his observations. Essentially, in Don Juan's philosophy, it is important to get to the point of realisation that, essentially, nothing 'matters'. Nothing is more important than anything else. If we come to that point, far from being despairing, it is liberating. Essentially, everything we choose to do is meaningless in absolute terms. Everything that we do is a *folly*. But, with everything lacking meaning in absolute terms, it is open to us to choose what we will attribute our personal meaning to. This then becomes a *controlled folly* – it does not cease to be a folly simply because we choose it, but the importance we attach to

it is a matter of our choice and control. It is important to remember that we have no omnipotence to change the essential nature of a folly – the opposite is to attribute omnipotence to ourself and our choices (an unfortunate tendency of human beings). We will also remember that our controlled follies are no more important than those of others in an absolute sense, but we will still work hard for them because they are our choices. This philosophy of nihilism can release considerable energy in us as we strive to advance our goals. But that energy is not one that would ride roughshod over other people and their goals, because, at a fundamental existential and philosophical level, we know that our choices are no more important than those of others. So, we can listen to the world of others and their different choices without feeling threatened about our own or without needing to threaten others about theirs. Hence, our willingness to listen to others and to prize them in their difference to us is deeply grounded in our personal philosophy.

At a superficial level of comprehension, nihilism and spiritual faith might seem polar opposites. Certainly, where the doctrine of ‘mission’ is a driving force in the religious person there will be a huge gulf between them and the nihilistic humanist. One of the observations that has interested me in relation to people of faith is how they can be divided according to mission. There is a fundamental political difference between a religious person whose faith is a personal one and another whose faith needs them to take their mission to heretics. The first religious does not need to change others and can value others for their difference while the second needs to judge and change others. It is no wonder that many people of faith are challenged when they try to come together in the Church.

As a nihilistic humanist it is a pleasure for me to work with a religious person from the first tradition outlined above. It is interesting how we reach the same position, from different starting points, in regard to a genuine valuing of others. I like to err on the side of being simplistic in argument because I find that position is more heuristic. So, perhaps a religious person from the first tradition is coming from a faith that ‘everything matters’ while my basis is that ‘nothing matters’ (in absolute terms). We might both value each other’s difference – what is much more dangerous to civilisation is the person who believes that *some* things matter.

When I work with my dear friend Brian Thorne, we come from very different yet very similar positions. We have won considerable personal knowledge of each other over 35 years of encounter. I know the potency of his faith and that it is manifested in everything he does. He knows the strength of the commitments I have made to our common areas. He knows that my philosophy carries a 'check' in it that would monitor my own actions lest I forgot that my values were no more important than those of others. I know that he is the kind of Christian who has deeply internalised his loving and that any sense of 'mission' he has is purely in terms of the example he sets as a person. We can deeply trust each other's passion. Probably there is no sounder basis for a working relationship than shared passion. When we work together as trainers we will each see differences in the ways we function. Brian is more obviously loving and more patient than I am and I find challenge a little easier. When we write together there is pride but not defensiveness in our own productions and it is easy to challenge each other. I know that a striving for communication is central to him and I admire his ability to write in a flowing style that weaves together ideas and feelings. For his part, he likes the way I can bring clients to life in our pages. We have never had a writing problem that we have not been able to solve, though, on one occasion, we deliberately took on a challenge where we knew from the outset that we would have to write separately. It was Chapter 3, entitled *The 'heart' of person-centred therapy: Spiritual and existential?* in *Person-Centred Therapy Today: New frontiers in theory and practice* (Mearns and Thorne, 2000). Early in the chapter we set out our intention:

In this chapter each of us, in his own language, is going to speak about what we consider to be the 'heart' of person-centred therapy. Our languages are very different and we want to preserve that difference in the hope that all readers might find resonance in one or the other, if not in both. (p. 55)

In my writing within that chapter I lay out the distinctly *existential* emphasis of my working. I know that others might easily use the term *spirituality* to describe the experience of meeting a client at relational depth, but I never use that word. Though the meaning of the word 'spirituality' has broadened considerably in recent times,

still, to me, it invokes the presence of the Holy Spirit. I choose not to use the concept, not because it is irrelevant to an atheist, but out of respect for those for whom it has a very special meaning. For me I find that I do not need the hypothesis of anything beyond the person because the humanity of the individual, no matter who they are, is wondrous enough and can describe the powerful experiences people have in relationship. In the chapter I set the scene for some case illustrations of the power of humanity in work with a hard-to-reach client, with an interesting aside to nihilism and divinity which went unexplained in the chapter but is relevant here:

Yet, the reality for the person-centred therapist is that when we properly enter the existential Self of another we find ourselves simply admiring the tenacity and the beauty of the human's survival. At this point we have stopped being a representative of even the subtle 'social control' forces within our society. We have entered the territory where nihilism and divinity meet. It is time to meet Bobby, an erstwhile Glasgow gangster. (p. 57)

In my books over the last ten years, I wanted to challenge the reader with a series of clients they might be not easily feel open towards. Whether it is accurate or not, I had a suspicion that many people were confusing person-centred therapy with cotton wool. While writers like Peter F. Schmid and I would tease out the nature of relational 'encounter' in person-centred therapy (Schmid and Mearns, 2006; Mearns and Schmid, 2006), much of the quality of that relationality seemed to become diluted by the time it reached clients. Instead of the person-centred therapist being a congruent and full figure with whom the client could knock up against in order to feel their own firmness, the way many person-centred counsellors described their practice sounded as though their clients were being offered a relationship with cotton wool – soft, warm, and in that sense comforting, but of no significant relational substance. When this was combined, as it generally was, with a disinclination to 'show their working' (Mearns and Thorne, 2007, pp. 123–4) in relation to the client, supervisee or trainee, the practitioner had succeeded in taking themselves out of the work in the same way as the classical analyst, with some of the same consequences in terms of the client's entrapment in a 'game' of

therapy, rather than in the reality of a therapeutic encounter. Such ‘cotton wool’ therapists have found a safe place to go to in order to avoid encounter, but the incongruence they have built into their working puts them in danger of burn-out in the longer term.

In my outlining of the power of *relational depth* (Mearns and Cooper, 2005), I hoped to bring the relational encounter back into attention. It has probably done that for many people, but I still find some who even see relational depth in terms of just a thicker roll of cotton wool.

The following account by a client gives a sense of what it can feel like to be offered a person rather than cotton wool.

Box 3.6 ‘I stopped needing to pretend’

I stopped needing to pretend. I had been in counselling three times before. They had all been good experiences and I thought that I had got a lot out of them. But this time was completely different. At first I didn’t know how to take Mary [the counsellor]. She was more ‘direct’ than I was used to. My first thought was that she was a bit ‘hard’ on me. I was used to something softer. But, she could really ‘meet’ me more fully than anyone before. She could even meet me through my defences. Once she challenged me by asking if I was presenting what I was talking about in a particular way to her – in a way that would make her think well of me. It was an awful thing to say – but she said it really well – I felt it was coming from her understanding of me, not any ‘judging’ of me. I just answered, ‘Yes’, and looked her straight in the eye. I didn’t even make my usual excuses. From that moment everything was different. I realised that I had two answers to every question – the ‘pretend’ one and the ‘real’ one. I began to give both of them. I was speaking to her in a way that was different to anything before. Even my tone of voice was different – it was less squeaky, more serious and, altogether, more ‘fullsome’. I began to experience everything more fully. When I felt emotions, they were more powerful – again, more fullsome. I realised, with some horror, that I had almost never been ‘real’ in my life before. I had habitually ‘put on a face’ to the world.

With me not defending, we got to areas I had never been to before. I saw different feelings within me as well as the ones I was used to feeling. In relation to my mother’s death I not only

saw my sadness, but I felt my hate, and also my sorrow for her. An interesting thing was that my 'not defending' actually made me less scared. This is difficult to explain, but it is important. It wasn't just that she made it safe for me so that I didn't need to defend. It was that she challenged me as a truly caring human being and I responded. It was me responding and continuing to respond that made me less scared – there was no dependence on her. It's unusual (Mearns and Thorne, 2007, p. 65).

As well as relational depth getting a lot of positive attention, I was genuinely surprised to find some colleagues who saw it as the antithesis of what Rogers was about. Usually they had not worked directly with Rogers but had been trained by someone who knew someone who knew Rogers during his time in Chicago. In fact, as I have often said, there is nothing new in relational depth other than Rogers' core conditions in powerful combination, except that it demands that the therapist does not settle for a dilution of those conditions.

As I mentioned earlier, in major case illustrations I began to introduce the reader to clients quite different from 'Joan' in *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* (Mearns and Thorne, 2007). Most particularly, I introduced readers to 'Bobby' (Mearns and Thorne, 2000), a former gangster who retained many of his associated skills, 'Dominic' (Mearns and Cooper, 2005), a 'hopeless drunk' (his own description) and the mute 'Rick' (Mearns and Cooper, 2005) who had shot a mother and her four children under five. I wanted to show how it was possible to 'reach' even such apparently difficult-to-reach clients by using nothing more, but also nothing less, than our humanity. I wonder how far I succeeded in my quest? Certainly, I have had a lot of good feedback about these cases and how they are written, particularly since I am willing to 'show my working' to the client and to the reader, including my obvious mistakes. Trainees particularly like the fact that I expose my mistakes – it frees them from the paralysing tyranny of believing that they always have to get it right. It would be difficult to establish a relationship at depth with a therapist who got it right all the time or, more realistically, with a therapist who didn't get it right but tried to hide that. But the writing has had its critics. Some have not liked my refusal to convert my clients' language into more politically correct

forms, and one critic from the non-directive strand of the person-centred approach said that Rogers would ‘turn in his grave’ at my behaviour in relation to Rick. I declined to inform her that Rogers had supervised this work.

Whether or not introducing these clients has had an impact on others, it has certainly affected me. The material is so powerfully existential that it grabs us up out of our everyday, inevitably less charged, living and reminds us that there are many people who have nowhere to take their own highly charged experiencing. While, as described above, I have no inclination towards ‘mission’, I do think that any profession that takes itself seriously should ask why only a small percentage of the population regards its services and the way it offers them as relevant. Historically, both Brian and I have sought to support the developing profession of counselling through holding offices in the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). We have also challenged the boundaries of the profession and he, more than me, has felt the consequent reactionary forces.

There is a possibility that the profession is getting close to an ossifying institutionalisation. This is a natural phenomenon – all institutions, indeed any grouping of people, seeks to norm its functioning. That is a part of the human being’s efforts to make their social environment safer and more predictable. It works best if there is, simultaneously, an opposite force of ‘individualisation’ where the socialisation process is challenged on the restrictions it is mounting on the individuals within it. But that, in turn, relies on people being willing to exert effective challenge. Most people ‘moan’ rather than challenge. I remember in my training as shop steward in the Transport and General Workers Union 40 years ago that we were taught never to moan. As was later well established in social psychology research, moaning is a way to trick oneself into thinking that we are challenging and cover up the fact that, in our actions, we are actually conforming.

When we look at hard-to-reach clients – clients who do not obviously fit our normal counselling contexts – we are challenged to think how counselling might broaden rather than narrow what it offers and the ways it extends its offers. We are so stuck with the therapeutic hour, the comfortable office and all the other elements by which our offerings are structured. Certainly they make life

comfortable for us and 10 per cent of the population, but what about the other 90 per cent? Can we take ourselves out of our immediate comfort zone to creatively meet other people who do not find our world relevant? On one of our annual training courses in Buenos Aires, I was impressed by a woman who said:

I've got it. I realise what the real challenge of relational depth is. It's about me looking at the fact that all my counselling at present is done within my gated community. I am going to get out into the wider community instead of being scared of it.

Perhaps what our creativity will develop will be something different from counselling or perhaps we will have the effect of taking the profession with us. However we develop, the challenge to us is simply stated – to share our humanity and see the impact that may have on others. It is moving to find that both people of faith and those who have none can meet over this considerable relationship.

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