

JOURNEY TO THE 'CENTRE': The history and philosophy of Atlow Mill Centre for Emotional Education

Jean Bond

AHPB seeks to act as a forum for ordinary people hoping for a more conscious and humane society and for those striving to be human in a rapidly changing world. (Self and Society, 2007)

It was encouraging to read the description of humanistic psychology in *Self and Society*, and of the aims of AHPB above. They reflect so accurately the purpose of Atlow Mill Centre, focusing as they do on the development of human potential and the encouragement of 'authenticity, spontaneity, personal responsibility, creativity, love, good will and personal power'. This is, in a nutshell the philosophy behind the work we do here at the centre.

The Journey Begins.

Many people ask me how I managed to set up Atlow Mill. I have considered this question and asked myself how I developed from being a PE teacher whose major focus was how to survive in an inner city school to someone who could be 'other' centred and have a

passionate desire to change the way society treats children and its citizens. It certainly did not begin at the Teacher Training College I attended from 1963 – 66 as a 'mature' student. There the focus seemed to be on 'subject teaching' rather than on children and we were ill prepared for such issues as ethnic minorities and disaffected; disruptive; disadvantaged pupils. Consequently my initiation into teaching in a school in Moss Side, Manchester was a nightmare mixture of confusion and fear. I had no understanding of the cultures of predominantly Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Polish, Arabic and Chinese young people I was attempting to put through P.E. lessons. I got up every morning (especially Wednesdays when I had 2C and D to teach) feeling sick and wishing I could be really ill to avoid going in.

In 1970, after taking an advanced diploma in P.E at Leeds and Carnegie I took a job in a new Open Plan Primary School in Leicestershire. Out of the 36 pupils in my class fifteen were underachieving. Several of them violently resisted coming to school – and they were only eight – nine years old. One boy had to be dragged to school every day by his mother. I could see that he was a bright and articulate boy who had been put into a remedial class at his other school because he could not spell well and his writing was difficult to decipher. I respected his capabilities. I designed individual programmes for all my pupils so that they could progress at their own rate. He excelled at problem solving and was in great demand for project work. He blossomed and began to drag his mother to school each day.

This class, which I taught for two years, was an inspiration to me as I watched them blossom and become more confident and eager to learn. In fact I could not get them out of the classroom at the end of the day. I became determined to do something about the discrimination and 'labelling' that had almost destroyed a bright and capable boy (and several others). I became passionate about suiting the curriculum to the needs of all children and it was to this end that I took a post as a Lecturer in Education at Coventry College of Education (later to become merged with the University of Warwick).

I was fired up to change what I saw as an unfair, inhumane and ineffective education system. To my dismay I realised, especially

after the merger, that Higher Education was the bedrock of that system. It took me nineteen years to accept that, if I could not even persuade the University to stop putting students through the ordeal of examinations, I was not going to have much of an impact on education as a whole.

In 1982/83 I took a sabbatical and set up a unit for disaffected pupils in a Leamington Secondary School. This was a salutary experience for me. All the theory I had learned and taught to my students proved to be ineffective in the face of the behaviour of the pupils in my unit. There was something I needed to learn which working with these pupils taught me. Painful though this was I came back to my University teaching with a totally different attitude.

I had shown far too little humility and had paid the price of isolation (from the rest of the school staff) I began to be totally open with my pupils and the staff about my feelings and my mistakes and hide nothing. (Bond, 1984)

This had a transformational effect on my relationship with the pupils (and the staff). It gave the pupils an emotionally literate model to follow. They began to talk about how they were feeling instead of acting it out by having temper tantrums and being destructive and abusive. I had learned the value of vulnerability as a means of connecting deeply with others and developing a mutually trusting. My pupils began to feel safe with me and I with them.



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When I returned to the university I related in the same way to my students and the work I did with them began to have an impact. They were starting to realise that first and foremost they had to understand their pupils, empathise with them and develop loving and compassionate relationships, as well as motivating them and setting firm and fair boundaries. In other words they needed to provide the secure attachment in their work with children that the children had probably not received from their parents (Hughes). Their classrooms had to become safe and nurturing places where children could rediscover their sense of themselves.

Although my students were very positive about my teaching methods, my colleagues at the university were, I think, very threatened by them – or me. I was marginalised by most of the staff who thought I was 'weird'. It was a lonely place to be, and one of my colleagues attempted to have me dismissed for making the students cry. I was a square peg in a round hole.

In the end my urge to teach in the only way that made sense to me, the way that would liberate children from the chains of oppression created by their destructive life experiences, encouraged me to take very early retirement and embark on an exciting journey into the unknown. I took, as Maslow put it, the growth choice rather than the fear choice which would have entailed clinging to the status and security of my tenured position, and I left. This was a huge step for me, coming as I did from a working class background where there was no financial or emotional security at all. However I knew that to stay would be soul destroying.

My intention was to develop the courses I had designed and delivered through the Open Studies department of the university for the general public. I eventually progressed to teaching this course during weekends in a several different locations around the country. Somewhat in awe and wonder I saw people growing in confidence and making major, life changing decisions which they had previously been too afraid to make. Participants seemed to develop a sense of self-worth and take better care of themselves. I did not really know how this was working except that it probably had something to do with the changes I had made in myself.

The courses were an eclectic mix of all the theories I had studied in an attempt to discover why the young people I had taught were so persistently self defeating and why intimate relationships, of which I had a great deal of

experience (I was now embarking on my third marriage) were so difficult to sustain. But that's another story (Bond 1993).

The idea for a centre for the development of human potential came originally from people who participated in these courses. It was to be a drop in centre called Harmony House. Unfortunately there was not sufficient commitment to it among the group so the idea never came to fruition. However it inspired me to create a different vision of a centre which was conceived in 1984 and is described in my book (Bond 1993). It took ten years precisely to find other people who were willing to make a considerable financial investment in setting up a centre and Atlow Mill was bought in July 1994. It fitted the description in the book very well.

Having become the head of a centre and therefore an 'important person' (!) one of my old insecurities came back to haunt me. I had been one of two members of staff at the university who had no 'A' levels and no first degree. I always felt like an inferior fraud. I decided that I should become 'qualified' to do the work I was doing.

I enrolled on a psychotherapy course. For several reasons I never completed it, but one of them was that I realised that I would probably be restricted to a rather narrow model of working. I suppose I am saying that no one theory seemed to be a sufficient tool for all people. It seems rather like saying that all you need in order to be a plumber is to own a spanner and the

knowledge of how to use it. If the job requires a blow torch then the spanner is not going to be of much use, no matter how skilful you are in its use. Anyway I was an educator at heart. This was pointed out by my supervisor on the course who criticised a session I did with a client saying, but this is education - not therapy. I remember thinking, 'well if it works, what does it matter!' I suppose I subscribe to the view of George Kelly when he developed the idea of constructive alternativism the principle of which means that:

'all the different theories of human nature that we encounter can be seen as different constructions, and our task is not to try to discover what is the 'correct' one but to examine the usefulness of each in helping us understand the nature of people' (Burr and Butt).

This is the sentiment that provided the motivation behind the development of the Atlow Mill Centre for Emotional Education.

A Short History of the Atlow Mill Centre

The place that five people bought in 1994 is very close to the original vision. It is a converted mill with an adjacent cottage and outbuildings, nestling in a steep secluded valley with a trout stream running by. There are seven acres of grounds incorporating a small coppice. It was love at first sight when we approached it down the steep drive.

The venture was not undertaken without problems. Of the five

who originally bought the property, two pulled out within six months. We recovered from this only to have the third person pull out after another couple of years. Tim, my husband and I bought these people out, leaving us with a very large mortgage on the property. Someone else then bought into the project to help us out then left a year later leaving us feeling betrayed, abandoned and with yet more debt to cover. I was beginning to think that we had made a huge mistake.

However progress was being made. We had refurbished the 'milking parlour' and put in extra bathroom facilities. We had obtained charitable status and were beginning to work with young people who were at risk of exclusion from school and society. The results showed that huge changes in their behaviour and academic performance at school were occurring. We have continued to work with young people with 'challenging behaviour' and have extended the age range to five year olds upwards. We have also worked with 'looked after children', one of which is the subject of the article 'Where do you go to my lovely' (see page 36). I love this work. It is demanding and challenging, physically and emotionally, and immensely rewarding.

We continue to offer courses to the general public too. I have developed five of them in all (see our web site www.atlowmill.org for details). These are a never ending source of joy to me as I see people grow and open up, standing in their power and

finding their voices. We have also been able to offer our work to other groups – survivors of childhood sexual abuse and carers' groups as well as offering training to teachers, social workers, staff from other charities and many others.

Ironically I seem to have come full circle on my own journey as I am once again teaching a university validated course; a Post Graduate Certificate in Emotional Education, in partnership with the University of Derby. This is the jewel in the crown of Atlow Mill, as it allows us to reach many professional people who will influence their colleagues and change practices in their places of work.

The difference between my current position and the one I had at Warwick is that I am not employed by the university and the work we do at Atlow Mill has earned a great deal of respect from members of the institution. I seem to be in the right place at the right time now. Also the assignments that my students submit require them to integrate their own experience with the theories they are studying, something that has always seemed to be essential if students are to put theory into practice in their lives. To me this is truly humanistic education. Most of the articles in this issue are based on these assignments.

Our students come from all walks of life, from postmen to philosophers, with a diverse history of academic achievement or non achievement. Those who have not obtained degrees often produce a better quality of work

than those who have. We are, of course, able to offer a great deal of individual tuition and guidance to our students. I think that says a lot about the deficiencies of the current education system.

Community

The other and perhaps most complex and important aspect of Atlow Mill Centre is the community. The original concept of the centre was that people should live and work here together. This idea of community arose from contact with the numerous people who came on courses and described the soul-destroying nature of loneliness. I myself had been a serial relationship junky before I married and in between marriages, feverishly going from one unsuitable relationship to another, because I could not bear to be on my own.

I began to formulate the notion that human beings are tribal by nature. The survival of individuals in prehistoric and later times relied on their being interdependent on each other. Alone they were dead. Isolation in more 'civilised' societies can lead to such excruciating emotional pain that people will be driven to kill themselves. Yalom cites the 'blackball' suicides of USA students when they were excluded from fraternities. Kapp et al concluded that group cohesiveness is in itself of therapeutic value and, may be an important factor in promoting personality change.

The Atlow Mill community derived from the idea of developing a modern 'tribe', who would perhaps have their own separate

accommodation (hut) round the compound and come together to share food, experiences, feelings and find mutual support. The 'huts' did not materialise (or haven't done so yet) but there have always been a number of people at the Mill who share a common sitting room, dining room and kitchen. I draw the line at sharing a bathroom personally!

Some community members come and quickly go, finding the necessity to be open, authentic; to negotiate and sit in the fire of conflict in order to resolve issues, too much for them. Others hang on for a while, believing that they can be an island of autonomy in a sea of cohesive relationships, but sooner or later this breaks down as it cannot be sustained in the face of the insistence on authentic communication from the rest of the group. The other problem with people who attempt to do this is that they violate the golden rule of Atlow Mill which is that we walk our talk.

The community attempts to model the philosophy of the work we do here, which requires everyone to take responsibility for their feelings and actions with the help and support of others. Most people who live here have taken one of the courses. This enables us to offer ongoing support to people in exploring their emotional processes, considering for instance whether a reaction to a situation is appropriate or whether it might be due to a trigger of the emotions stored in the amygdala, which were laid down before the child had the necessary vocabulary to help them to

process the experience. This is known as a myg trig by the members of the community, an expression borrowed from Goleman.

With appropriate support, people are empowered to put words to their feelings and so get down to the basis of their upset. I have certainly grown hugely from this experience. It has often been painful, sometimes almost unbearable, but if I have managed to apply the principles of emotional education to myself and others then it has been a revelation. Being around people who can help you to explore your emotional processes is a huge privilege, but it is not for the faint hearted.

An issue which arises frequently within the community is the one of power. It has taken me many years to arrive at the realisation that although power can and should be shared and all members of the community can and should have parity of esteem, we are not all equal. This came as quite a shock as equality was a core value for me. The truth is that, as Arnie Mindell points out, some have more rank than others in communities. He indicates that there are many types of rank; psychological, emotional, intellectual, seniority, experience, wisdom, position etc, and this will vary from situation to situation. With rank goes power. It is important that rank is acknowledged and owned by the one who has it and by others around them. By not acknowledging rank we are in danger of abusing our power, because it can be used to manipulate and dis-empower

people, making them feel inadequate and inferior. However if we have rank and do not use it responsibly then people can end up feeling let down and directionless.

As one of the community said recently, communities need leaders and we need to respect their leadership. Of course this can also be quite dangerous if leadership decisions are not questioned and explored. It has been difficult for me to accept leadership of the community. It has meant upholding the principles that Atlow Mill stands for and challenging people who are not being authentic and supportive members of the community. It has meant being willing to be vulnerable myself (carrying on the learning from my teaching career) and allowing other people to support me and see that I cannot always cope, that I make mistakes and am – much to their surprise sometimes – a fallible human being. My vision is that one day all leaders will see the power in this. When Margaret Thatcher made her famous statement, the lady is not for turning, I was horrified at the implications: that even if she was wrong she was never going to admit it. I can have no faith in leaders like that. I hope I am not and never will be one of them.

I am beginning to see that living in the type of community we have created, although difficult at times, has the potential to provide a truly safe and healing environment where people can feel unconditionally loved, safe and accepted. One of the articles in this issue is by Joanne Grierson who has been at Atlow

Mill for five years now. Her development and release from her traumatised patterns is a testimony to the power of true community.

The Wider Community

Twice a year we compose and distribute a newsletter to keep people informed of our journey and invite them to share their learning with others. Last summer I wrote an article entitled Leaving a Legacy. Below is the response of one person who had a history of being abused and tortured by her father. I think it is a moving

account of the way in which ignorance and fear continue the experience of childhood abuse. This is something that we at Atlow Mill are committed to changing.

I think this article and the others in this issue demonstrate that the work we are doing here is enabling people who do our courses to become thoughtful, aware and self accepting people with a sense of their own worth, whom we have given the tools they needed to help them in their journey through the obstacle course of life.

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