

THE GARDEN AND THE EXILE

By Jane Gibbon

Jane Gibbon made a study of the use of psychotherapy in the garden for the resettlement of exiles while studying for her BSc Hons in Landscape and Garden Design at Writtle College, Essex.

That the natural environment has a positive effect on health and well-being is an accepted fact these days, but less well known is the manner in which a garden can enable an exile to come to terms with having to create a new life when all they are really wishing for is to be back in their homeland.

'how long shall I spend the life of a stranger in a foreign land? ... what am I here? A rootless person in this alien soil, no sense of belonging. Just another plastic plant in a painted pot. No flowers bloom, even the buds wither away before their time.'

'Siberia in My Soul' by Taslima Nasrin.

Given a garden and a psychotherapist some wonderful work can take place, yet very few such partnerships exist, even though there is no let up in the need for such a service. Garden projects that aim to help with mental illness are more common, but for an exile it is not a question of mental illness but the suffering of psychosocial stress due to having been uprooted. Nonetheless, very real damage can be done in an exile's life and to their families if the issue of resettlement is not addressed, regardless of whether or not they have experienced the trauma of imprisonment or torture, for it is rare that a return to their homeland is possible except after very many years. Harboured an obsession with the unrealistic idea of going home makes it difficult for the exile to live their life, but, helped to resettle, life can at least be lived, even if it is not their preferred choice.

Jenny Grut, under the auspices of the Medical Foundation, was the first person to make use of a garden in such work with groups of exiles. She worked from the view that the unhealthy part of the exile's experience is in the past, and that it is time to work with the healthy part that is in the present to enable the interpretation and understanding of the traumatic experience of exile. She practised dynamic psychotherapy, which puts emphasis on helping

clients face the truth, the garden providing her with a medium in addition to a setting. Having this medium meant there was a 'third party'; operating at the border between explicit and tacit, between communal and individual, between objective and subjective, and between the conscious and the unconscious or prereflectively conscious. In so doing the garden offered a wide transitional territory between idiosyncratic experience and the norms of socially generated experience. In addition, humans have the ability, by virtue of attention, to incorporate or abstract themselves from the garden environment (a crucial phenomenon when re-establishing an exile's focus) and this process took place within the fourth dimension of a garden, that of time. Time is a rich experience: it can be real, cosmic, biological, geological, historic, and psychological, all of which may be considered therapeutic vehicles.

An exile's world in Britain does not usually encompass such a thing as a garden, let alone the services of a therapist in their resettlement, and asked their opinion on gardens they would say the ones they left behind are the only ones of any worth, yet in this instance, provided with the opportunity, clients made strenuous efforts to attend sessions regularly. The personality, like the body, has a natural tendency towards healing and growth and the fundamental task of psychotherapy is to create conditions that facilitate these processes. This must have been recognised by clients. Crucially they were in control of the planting, care and development of the garden, on both an individual and a shared basis, and in dealing with these it was possible for all the important issues necessary to the therapy to arise. Triggers ranged from purchases to the health of the plants and the climate, plus activities like decision-making and the use of tools. Issues were such things as the personal, the familial and the political, and comparison between the client's homeland and the garden. Elements and plants needed to be both familiar and foreign, so the clients could be in a comforting space with plants they knew when they felt upset or sad. It was of paramount importance that all activity was confidential, that clients had privacy, that they felt safe, and that they could build trust. Without this they could not be in a position to face the often-painful issues that arose in the course of their activities. Bearing in mind the different cultural backgrounds of the clients and the fact they were required to come to terms with, and not escape from, their British setting, it was appropriate that a garden in Britain can be regarded as culturally neutral, but, in its basic nature, British.

The garden's client profile was diverse - male, female, adult, child, and all ages, ethnic origins and creeds. Clients were able-bodied, disabled, and perhaps suffering the effects of medication. They could be at any level of English language proficiency from the limited to the proficient but interpreters were not used. They were also of widely differing social backgrounds. But, whether living alone or with family, there was one thing they all had in common, and that was poverty and the need for resettlement. Success was measured qualitatively and all clients showed improvement; the measure ranging from a client smiling to a complete life change. Either was equally valid as it must be borne in mind that each exiled client was unique.

Simply put, the clients' presenting issues and relevant solutions can be summarised as follows, with the garden able to provide metaphors in addition to the usual benefits:

Exile means loss and this is addressed through the planting of translated items from the client's garden memories. An example would be a date palm being an essential plant for a garden in a client's eyes but impossible in Britain, meaning it is lost to them. However, it can be remembered, talked of, and a plant chosen to act in its stead. This they can plant in the garden and care for, and in this way reality is acknowledged with the memory intact. The loss has been translated into the garden as a reminder in a present reality.

Denial of reality cuts clients off from life. The memory of the date palm can be utilised by creating an artificial, ornamental palm. This stands in the stead of the real thing but simultaneously is patently false, proving this as the only form that can exist in Britain. This gives expression to past reality as a present reality.

Anger, which is ever present, finds no outlet. Opportunities to express anger are present in gardening activities such as driving in stakes, digging, mowing, and cutting back.

Loss of pride finds its counterpart in the experiences of the plants in the garden. Sometimes planted specimens fail and many will not live up to expectations. This offers comparison with the personal and puts loss of status into perspective.

Closing down creates an unwillingness to acknowledge beauty. Clients will be reluctant to enter a garden and will reject it. It is yet another alien thing contributing to their culture shock and reminds them of their failure in life. To 'bring them back' is to focus on this same beauty, using their reactions and the resultant interaction to provide an opening for them.

Absence of emotion means life cannot be lived, but the barriers an exile has raised against emotion can be breached utilising all the sensory connections in the garden, touch being crucial.

Absence of communication means life cannot be lived. Texture can be used to rekindle the process. Holly spikes give a sharp message and demand a response. Activities and interaction with the garden assist the communication process in a safe environment where the resultant exposures of pain are rendered controllable and less frightening.

Generational dislocation means the generations that make up the family have been lost or broken apart. But they can be 'recreated' via propagation activities. This makes 'siblings', 'parents', etc., which are planted in the garden. Some can be named in memory of specific people.

Remembrance can take place through planting of commemorative specimens. The names, colours and properties of plants all add extra relevance.

Below are simple examples of what engendered therapy in the garden. What was of benefit to a client, though, could sometimes conflict with the wellbeing of the garden itself, so the horticultural assistant needed to be sympathetically understanding:

- How a non-native plant fares can be compared with personal experiences.
- Discussion centring on the orientation of the garden can enable both political and geographical issues to be raised, such as the global UKcentric designation of east and west and its relation to clients' homelands and history.
- The view back to the house from inside a greenhouse can raise the issue of being removed from one's original abode to another.
- The replacement and recycling of worn-out artefacts can engender discussion of how it feels to be old and the dying and renewal of the generations.
- The use of tools spotlights the issues surrounding focus, concentration and detail.
- The lack of an interpreter makes clients come to terms with the use of another language. The presence of plants and other natural objects, however, assists as they act as embodiments of what needs to be said.
- Tricky projects and tasks can engender a focus on danger, discomfort and anger.
- The planning and execution of projects and tasks can raise issues of ownership, the host culture, friendship and budgets.
- Purchases entail venturing into the outside environment and so raise issues of travel.
- Activities lead into the responsibility and commitment needed for resettlement.

The use of a garden on the part of a therapist requires that the garden provide the means and opportunity for the following on the part of clients:

- Translation of the loss of homeland into the physical fabric of the garden so providing memory in a present reality.
- Provision of a present physical reality as substitute for a past reality.
- Provision of opportunity for the expression of anger.
- Provision of physical comparisons with the personal in order to achieve a sense of perspective.
- Confrontation of the exile with beauty in order to work with the reactions it arouses.
- Circumvention of the exile's defences via the senses.
- Introduction of messages and rekindling of communication via physical contact/interaction with the garden.

- Creation of plant generations that flourish.
- Planting of commemorative specimens of all types.

The aims to be achieved on the part of the client are as follows:

- Acknowledgement of a second home.
- Acceptance.
- Removal/letting out of anger.
- Reinstatement of pride.
- An opening up.
- Reinstatement of emotion.
- Reinstatement of communication.
- Continuity of the generations.
- Opportunity for commemoration.

The clients, whose only wishes were to return home were, of course, not in a position to formulate the objectives set out above as part of a specific personal aim, but they were nonetheless attending sessions at the garden in order to achieve them - and achieve them they did.

While the significance of the practical aspects of a garden in achieving client aims is fairly straight forward, it is also interesting to look at the garden's aesthetic aspect in the context of the above activities. Miller, who has written profoundly on the many aspects of gardens, says it is the combining of a garden's environmental nature with humans as biological organisms that makes a garden cross-culturally intelligible and meaningful, and she also sees the metaphorical significance of gardens as lying in the perceived similarities between humans and plants, with the vocabulary of a garden's existence serving well to describe that of humans - easy to see how these latter two aspects would be particularly useful. Interestingly she sees the only dissimilarity as humans not having appropriated the concept of dropping their leaves, when this may not actually be so: this is, in essence, what an exile does when abruptly transplanted into their new environment. However, Miller also regards the act of creating a garden as a symbolic refusal of the terms under which life has been presented to us, which makes for very appropriate last words.

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Jane Gibbon's full thesis is lodged at Writtle College, Chelmsford, Essex www.writtle.ac.uk

FURTHER READING: *The Healing Fields* by Sonja Linden and Jenny Grut.
Francis Lincoln 2002 ISBN 0 7117 202 7

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