

On the couch

with Rachel Freeth



What are your current roles and responsibilities?

I spend most of my time practising as a person-centred therapist in independent practice. I also do some freelance training and educational activities, devising and delivering workshops and seminars on subjects related to psychiatry and mental healthcare. In addition, I am quite often writing something or other of a professional or academic nature.

Can you describe a typical working day?

My working days vary quite a bit, although I do set aside particular days of the week for seeing clients, mostly working online from home. When I have some writing on the go, it does have a tendency to spill into all available space, if I am not careful. The one activity I do nearly every day is to read for a couple of hours, pretty early in the morning.

What are the highs and lows of your working life?

The highs include making connections with people in whatever role I am in. Also, seeing change, growth and healing in others and sensing that I have played some part in this. Being valued is important, too. Lows can often emerge from feeling overstretched and burdened. I also get extremely heavy hearted by the ways the helping professions, which include counselling and psychotherapy, have been influenced by neoliberal values, the biomedical model and the pathologisation of human experience, at the expense of understanding and giving attention to the social and cultural context in which distress arises. I am also demoralised by the effects of our blame and risk-averse culture and by what I regard as excessive evaluation and monitoring. I think this makes us fearful and anxious and diminishes our ability to care. I suppose what I am saying is that the dominant political, economic and cultural values of the Western world get me down.

How did you get to where you are today?

A chronological-style answer would highlight qualifying as a medical doctor in 1994, then training in psychiatry. Becoming a doctor was

never actually a given when I was growing up – and I encountered a number of obstacles. Once qualified, though, training to become a psychiatrist probably was inevitable. However, only a couple of years into my psychiatric training, I separately trained as a person-centred counsellor.

My choice of approach was a very deliberate one, having come across Carl Rogers at medical school. I latched on to what he says about empathy, the therapeutic relationship, autonomy and the nature and use of power. For most of my professional life, I have straddled these two very different roles – and it hasn't been easy. Nevertheless, I have endeavoured to build bridges of understanding between the worlds of psychiatry and counselling and psychotherapy. Then, in 2020, I left my job as an NHS psychiatrist in order to work more fully in a therapeutic way, free from the increasingly intolerable (and, as I experienced them, harmful) constraints within my role and organisation.

Another answer is that I am currently exploring this question in therapy! I want to be more aware of and understand how layers of personal experiences, family and cultural conditioning have influenced what I have always essentially regarded as a vocation.

How do you look after yourself?

I do a range of things, in addition to early-morning reading, including running (or other exercise), listening to music (I mean listening and not just having it on in the background), singing in choirs and giving time for relationships. I also try to pay attention to the attitudes I hold towards myself.

What's the most useful thing you have learned?

To appreciate paradox, mystery and the unknown, which I think helps me to cultivate a sense of wonder and live with uncertainty and the questions life continually asks us.

If you could make one change, either in your professional or personal life, what would it be?

To give myself more space for non-doing, and aimlessly drift a little.

Who or what is your inspiration?

Signs of healing and growth wherever and whenever they occur, not just in people. I am fascinated by what gives life – the 'life force' or *spiritus vitae*. In other words, I am inspired and intrigued by what gives life in all its dimensions, material and spiritual.

What would you tell your younger self?

'You don't need to change anything about yourself.' But, more importantly, I would pay attention to my tone of voice and smile.

What book would you recommend to other therapists?

Other than my own (at the risk of hubris), I would recommend Carl Rogers' *A Way of Being*. I think there is something so deeply human and personal about what he says and particularly the way he says it.

Do you have a favourite song?

I frequently listen to Renaissance choral music, especially Thomas Tallis. I also have a number of favourite pop songs from the 1980s, when I was a teenager. The first pop single I bought was Paul Young's *Come Back and Stay*. I never realised it at the time, but I think the words held a lot of meaning for me.

Who is your fantasy client?

Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, might be an interesting challenge. Hopefully, I might feel that I don't have to come up with the answers.

In your dreams, you are...

...playing JS Bach on a cathedral organ to an appreciative audience, although an audience of one would be enough.

Rachel Freeth is a person-centred therapist in private practice. She worked as a psychiatrist in the NHS in Gloucestershire and Herefordshire for many years. Rachel's recent book, Psychiatry and Mental Health: a guide for counsellors and psychotherapists, published by PCCS Books, is available now.
