



Into the wild

Child at Heart offers troubled young people and families a wilderness experience that is a therapeutic *inward-bound* journey. **Simone Silver Path** reports

Wilderness psychotherapy is at the cutting edge of psychotherapy. Child at Heart works with the Four Shields, an earth-based ecopsychology model that acknowledges the cycles and seasons in nature and how they affect our lives. In other words, we show our clients how to work with the teachings of the land. The teachings of the Four Shields did not come from the mind and so are not part of rational, linear thought, but part of mythical, intuitive thinking, and are linked to the work of James Hillman¹, the father of Archetypal Psychology.

The South Shield

He Who Walks With Courage is 15 and has lived in 47 different placements. When he came into residential care, he was angry, often violent, and lacking in any sense of self-worth. He entered the Four Shields with our wilderness psychotherapy programme not knowing who he was or where he belonged. In the South Shield, he named the childhood that did not exist, made address labels with his 47 addresses on them and threaded his name through them, searching for the lost child that he was. When the work was done, he went to the river with the other young people and workers and played on a rope, swinging out and dropping into the water, screaming with delight. He had found the child. He remembered the pain and loss of his childhood and reclaimed his right to play. This is the work of the South.

Who we work with

Child at Heart works with young people who have experienced trauma and abuse, and with young people who have behavioural problems, have been excluded and are hard to engage. They present with extremely challenging behaviours – many have suffered neglect, witnessed domestic violence or are in the youth offending service. They are between the ages of 13 and 19, and we work with their parents, foster carers, residential workers and other professionals. We also work with families where communication has broken down.

The West Shield

She Who Has Wings is 15. She lost her mother when she was a child, and has suffered many losses since. She has experienced neglect and emotional abuse. Her needs have never been met. She arrived having never been in the country before and was scared of everything. She was asked to take a medicine walk – a walk with full awareness of everything that you see, smell, touch, taste and feel, a walk where you create a threshold and step through it out into the universe, allowing it to be your teacher. She saw sheep for the first time and was afraid, she saw caterpillars and was afraid, thinking they looked like small snakes. She found bones on the ground, the bones of a sheep. They reminded her of death and of her mother. She went to look more closely, and as she bent over, a butterfly flew out of the centre of the bones. 'That's like me. When my mum died, I went on living.' The next day, she walked into a dark forest and met her own darkness, her grief and her inability to let go. She found caterpillars and gathered them on her hand. A butterfly landed on her palm and stayed



for a long time. She found red berries, her mum's favourite colour, and, back at base camp in her own unique ceremony, put them on the fire to let go of her mum, but not forget her. In the West, she met her own fears and transformed them. This is the work of the West.

What we do

We take young people through the Four Shields, which are a psychological and physical map of all nature, of which we are a part. To do this, we first of all bring young people into community through Holding the Space, a radical and unique approach to working with trauma and abuse that originated in the Coventina School of Therapy to create therapeutic community. This approach has been taken up nationally and has been researched by SIRCC, the Scottish Institute of Residential Childcare, Strathclyde University (see the SIRCC website²). An integral part of Holding the Space is to use, as therapy, both creative arts and the Way of Council (see panel) – a deep listening practice that has its roots in many traditions, for example Native American Indian, the nomadic tribes of the Sahara and the Quakers. In the Council, all people are equal, they all have an equal voice and we sit in the belief that each person is being the best that they can be.

The wilderness psychotherapy programme runs over one year when we are working with looked after young people.

Each shield is connected to a season: summer, autumn, winter and spring, and so young people come to us for five days in each season to experience the shield. Normally, we only take young people who attend all four sessions, although with looked after young people, we have to allow some flexibility in our model. In the sessions, we tell stories and show young people how to make medicine walks out on the land. We teach clients how to learn from nature and see how nature reflects their own journey, how it can show them how to move forward in life. This is not an Outward Bound course but an inward-bound journey. It is therapy. We, the elders, mirror the stories of the young people back to them in the third person: 'I hear the story of a young man who...' This is a powerful way of working, in which we take the medicine of the young person's story and drop it back into their hearts so they can really feel who they are in all of their beauty, because they see and feel it differently.

It is in order to help young people tell their stories that we use the creative arts. They make pictures, sculptures, medicine bundles, poems and songs. These are all shared in Council and the stories are mirrored by elders. Young people also experience ceremony and what it is to be truly valued and belong to a community. They leave, becoming Carriers of the Council, taking this way of working back into their own world.

“ Because of this environment, young people retell their stories without the fear of the clinical data of dysfunction being imposed upon them. The Council holds them in a non-judgmental, non-hierarchical space where they are free to express the whole of themselves ”

The North Shield

He Who Is Circled by Seven Birds is 15 years old. He has experienced emotional abuse, neglect and domestic abuse. He is volatile, with challenging behaviours and an explosive temper. He did not come to the West Shield, but in the North Shield he did the work of the West and the North. He remembered his journey through life as he journeyed through nature. He stuck to the main path on his medicine walk, choosing to go off and explore wilder places but always keeping the road in sight. On leaving the road, he was anxious about the uncertainty and kept marking the walk by writing his name on the earth. He made a map of his life with an explosion in the centre and roads leading out of that to different places. He loved making gifts out of natural materials found on his walks and giving them with deep thought and meaning to others in the group. In the North Shield, he climbed the hill to seek his vision for the gift he would bring into the world as an adult. As he sat there alone on top of the hill, seven birds came and circled around him. When he got up to come back to the community, the birds left. His gift was to have children and teach them this way so that the world would be a better place.

Why we do it

Many young people are not only damaged by trauma but also by the traumatic way they remember childhood, believing that they are wrongly shaped as a result of their past. Wilderness psychotherapy works to repair some of that damage, by connecting clients back to nature and the Four Shields, opening them to a wider, wilder space where there is more room. In this space, they discover the greater story of who they are – they have experienced trauma, but they are so much more than that. They are more than their pathology as defined by others, more than the labels imposed on them. This work returns them to the bigger notion of destiny and what must be recovered of our personal calling into life ie there is a reason I am alive.

To do this work, we set aside the psychological frames that are imposed on us all. They are not large enough; they trim us down to fit that frame. James Hillman¹ talks about how the concept of developmental growth limits us as we move step by step from infancy, through troubled youth, to mid-life crisis, ageing and death, plodding through a planned map, in which life becomes more and more boring, with the central figure wandering in a desert of dried-out experiences. It is not young people who need to change but we who create this narrative without plot on their behalf, without mystery, and often without hope. Too often, as therapists, we intuit what the outcome will be for a young person, 'pregnant by 16', 'in trouble with the law' etc. When we think like this, we are robbing young people of their true biography of the destiny that is written into the bigger story. Wilderness psychotherapy takes young people out onto the land to rediscover the vast landscape that exists in all of us. Modern psychology is about caged beings; the Four Shields model takes us back to a time when we were uncaged, where anything is possible. This work revises their stories, in terms of very large ideas and emotions such as myth, mystery, love, community and belonging.

Many of these young people have attachment disorders and damaged attachment patterns. They cannot manage foster care and the intimacy of one-to-one or family relationships. Wilderness psychotherapy and Holding the Space are ways of creating healthy and safe attachment, the sense of belonging to a community that includes the whole of nature. Young people, in this work, learn that they are parented by the world, that nature is their teacher. They are enabled to see, in the telling of their stories, that they are more than just a victim of the past, they are heroes/heroines of their own stories. This work encourages the heroic journey, where they meet the whole of who they are in their connection to the forces of the natural world.

Because of this environment, young people retell their stories without the fear of the clinical data of dysfunction

being imposed upon them. The Council holds them in a non-judgmental, non-hierarchical space where they are free to express the whole of themselves. They move away from the parentalism that keeps them from trust and pleasure in the physical and the imaginal world of Hillman. The more we believe that our nature comes from our parents and their parenting, the less we are open to the influences around us. In wilderness psychotherapy, the world is your story, and your connection to that world is the lifeblood of your wellbeing and your ability to live a healthy life with healthy choices. This way of working asks of a young person that they take a leap of faith that brings them out of the parental home, the world as they have known it, and into the home of the natural world, where they can discover true healing in nature.

The East Shield

She Who Writes Poetry is 15 and has a background of abuse and neglect. She has witnessed violence in the family and her mum uses alcohol and drugs. In the East, she met the trickster many times, in the form of tree roots tripping her up. She talked about the different voices in her life pulling her this way and that, tripping her up, and how they are the trickster. She heard the sound of water and followed it, knowing that it had a teaching for her. She noticed the dark and the light on the water and said this was like her life, sometimes dark and at others light and playful. She created ceremony to honour her

grandmother who had cared for her, offering a tea bag to the earth because her grandmother liked tea. In the East, she found her voice in the Council and for the first time did not ask her link worker to speak for her, as she had previously, but told her own story and had it mirrored back to her. She wrote a poem, powerful words narrating her story of being abandoned and left alone at birth. She became a Carrier of the Council and said that she wanted to train in this work and teach others this way of being. In the East, she became a woman.

Outcomes

Many of the young people we work with change their behaviour patterns, not because they are told they must but because they are able to make different choices as a result of this work. In the residential homes where Holding the Space is used, there is a significant reduction in the use of restraint and sanctions. Young people begin to take responsibility for themselves and the way that they are, and residential workers learn a therapeutic approach in relation to this work. When asked about wilderness psychotherapy and how it has affected them, the young people say: 'It has changed my life, it has really changed my life.' ●



The practice of Way of Council

The Way of Council is about living together in a community in which everyone has a voice, everyone is respected and everyone has the right and opportunity to speak and be heard.

The Way of Council is a highly structured groupwork method which is held within a 'sacred space'. The setting up of the 'sacred space' is described below. The Way of Council has clear boundaries for its operation.

Council has four guidelines:

- 1 Speak from the heart – express your personal opinion
- 2 Listen from the heart – pay attention to what is being said
- 3 Be spontaneous – say what is on your mind at that time
- 4 Be lean of words – say what you need to say and don't elaborate.

Council also has two 'containers' which make Council a safe space:

- 1 What is said in Council stays in Council
- 2 Be the best you can be at this moment.

Finally, Council has one rule, which is that participants can only speak when they are holding the 'talking piece'. There are usually several rounds in which participants speak in turn.

The aim of these boundaries is to enable participants to feel safe and fully present within the process.

Simone Silver Path BACP (Snr Accred) is a therapist and trainer who has worked in the UK and in America for the last 20 years. For the last 13 years, she has managed a project in the North East working with children, young people and their families/carers who have experienced child sexual abuse, and also works with children and young people who sexually harm other children. She is founder of Holding the Space, a radical approach to working with trauma and abuse, and has introduced this work into social care by training residential children's home workers and foster carers. She lives in Northumberland with a partner, two dogs and two cats and is doing an MA in Creative Writing at Newcastle University.

Reference

- 1 Hillman J. The soul's code. London: Bantam; 1997.
- 2 SIRCC is now part of CELCIS (Centre for Excellence for Looked-after Children in Scotland). www.celcis.org. For the part 1 evaluation of Holding the Space, see www.celcis.org/media/resources/publications/HTS_Sunderland_Report_AFS_June_2010.pdf

Sources

Child at Heart wishes to thank: Meredith Little and the late Steven Foster of the School of Lost Borders in America, for their teachings in the Four Shields and Council; Gigi Coyle and Marlow Hotchkiss of the Ojai Foundation in California, for the teachings in the Way of Council; Pippa Bondy of Ancient Pathways, Wales, for introducing Council to the Coventina School of Wilderness and Creative Arts Therapy; and James Hillman for his inspirational body of work in Archetypal Psychology.

Further information

The Coventina School, in partnership with Wild Northumbrian, offers a diploma in Creative Arts and Wilderness Therapy in Northumberland, for those who wish to become wilderness psychotherapy guides using the creative arts. This is a two-year training for people who have a certificate level in counselling. Child at Heart with Wild Northumbrian offers programmes of creative arts and wilderness therapy to young people between the ages of 13 and 19 and to families where communication has broken down. Wilderness programmes range from three days to three weeks, and one year for looked after young people. For more information, visit www.childatheart.org.uk or www.wildnorthumbrian.co.uk, email simone@childatheart.org.uk or call 07891 351 665.

“The teachings of the Four Shields did not come from the mind and so are not rational, part of linear thought, but part of mythical, intuitive thinking”