

## **Meeting 4 Corsham, December 10, 2015 Empathy and its limits in i) the relationship between clinical psychologist and patient ii) in nature-writing: and how to involve the public in nature conservation.**

Present were: Morag Shuaib, Linda Blair, Bambo Soyinka, Kayte Lackie, Emma Geen, Tanvir Bush, Grace, Ania Spyra, Becky Midwinter, Linda Blair, Morag Shuaib, Gerard Woodward, Tracy Brain, Richard Kerridge, Robert Sherman, Patrick Edwards, Deb McCormick, Rebecca Midwinter, Maggie Gee (chairing)

- 1) **Presentation by clinical psychologist, journalist and broadcaster Linda Blair.** She began with a drawing of a continuum of possible relationships between psychologists and patients: if there were a horizontal line, 'detachment' would be on the LH side and 'over-involvement' on the RH side. Above and below the horizontal line respectively would be another polarity, 'sympathy' and 'analytical'. Poised between the four approaches she wrote 'empathy', which she also extended by the notion of 'full listening'. (Though Linda pointed out that historically, sympathy had been used to mean what we now mean by empathy.) In terms of present usage and her own practice she saw empathy more as 'trying to put yourself in someone's place', or side by side with them, whereas sympathy, however well-meant, implied the sympathiser was above the one sympathised with. She emphasized the importance of recognising the limits to empathy: in clinical practice (and in life?) you could not too easily say you 'understood' what someone felt, because in the end no-one knows what someone else's life feels like. She instanced striking examples of lack of empathy, like early work in the USA seeking to prove that black people were different from white people because their brains were smaller. At the end she briefly referred to her interest in what myth and fairy-tale tell us about shared emotions and shared narratives.
- 2) **Presentation by nature-writer, science journalist and activist Morag Shuaib.** She spoke about the ways she has faced two challenges. First, as someone who tries to interest the public in wild-life and conservation and particularly in ways of joining up different areas of natural landscape for the benefit of wild-life, how could she find language to write about nature so as to involve and move her audience as well as informing them? How could self-interest be made part of the picture, so people *wanted* conservation, rather than thinking it was an abstract good? Secondly, as an independent nature-writer on her own account, how could she find language to describe plants and animals that had emotional as well as informational power, and how could she (and indeed, should she?) find ways of escaping from the 'external observer' viewpoint and writing more empathically with the natural world she described? She was aware of the risks of anthropomorphising, but she wanted to move closer than the conventional descriptive mode. She then read two passages from her manuscript-in-progress which showed two different ways of facing the problems. The first was a vivid account of going out to sea in a boat full of cousins, as a girl in Kuwait, and catching fish. We saw the fish glittering in front of us as she read, and she recorded her attempts to 'grasp' the fish as a living being: did the fish they caught feel? And the second described the development of a butterfly that intercut two perspectives, one a very detailed and fully embodied physical realisation of the butterfly-as-material-creature, the other a more analytical/external account of the process.