

Milieu Therapy - The Creative Etheric Womb

Wilfred Bion developed the idea of *Milieu Therapy*. It is the psychological ethos of many therapeutic communities, including the one in which I used to work, a children's residential home for damaged and abused children. The core idea is that the surrounding environment can be so shaped as to have a healing effect on the human being, the child, about which it is centred.

Two definitions are given of the word which can lead us deeper into a material, a social and an etheric experience. Etheric here being the natural vital energy and how it lives in a natural habitat or environment. The definition states:

1. Social environment, surroundings in which a person lives and which shape him or her. "the social milieu".
2. ESPECIALLY BIOLOGY. Habitat of plants, animals, microorganisms, etc. (in which they thrive, grow, which is vital for them).

This environment may be the very state of being, the very state of mind of the other members in that environment, as much as the colours, the architecture, the furniture and furnishings, the art work (or lack of it) on the walls, the sounds and smells, indeed the cleanliness of those surroundings. The children I used to work with were former victims of abuse. Shaped by environments of threat, intimidation and neglect. I was given the files, told to read them and simply observe the children's interactions for a month. Some of the stories were shocking to the outsider, as I had been till then. The work we undertook was about establishing safe spaces, boundaries, places and homes, where children could form relationships with adults free of the threat of physical violence and sexual imposition.

The adults were not all university educated professionals. Some were simply cleaners, surrogate aunts, support staff. Even a group cat (to varying degrees well treated). There was no such thing as "simple" here: either of answers to the question of evil in life, or to its therapeutic resolution in healing, but principles, ideals could and can still be adhered to. An "environment" does not discriminate between the vital role played by a cook over that of a health care psychological professional. An environment can perhaps *be* therefore, more objective than we tendentially, *are*. Be that as it may, ideas such as Milieu therapy, as they are lived and experienced, are vital in understanding deeper aspects of how healing and indeed growth come about.

Vital as much in this microcosm of the interaction of individuals in a community, in a family, or as in society at large.

From where such children had come, often daily, regular meals were an anomaly, clean ordered surroundings were for them something only to have been witnessed in the lives of fantasy others on TV. Form, Order, Regularity. All those things were due to that, important. We held them sacrosanct in and through our work. We encouraged each other to uphold them with reverence.

A ball park figure was put to us: about 10% of society have experienced some element of this in their childhood lives. In many social work studies, the effect of urban environments, housing and government policy was well documented. It swung easily from the vicissitudes of one political view to the other, as the decades came and went; yet it is the rare commentator who was able to articulate the moral downward drift that society has experienced over the decades. The ability to really see how moral decline in society effects and shapes the members of it, requires the time and inner work to develop thinking distance to the times one lives in. And so really, it was only in literature, drawn from lived experience, that I found more incisive commentary on social realities. One such commentator is Theodore Dalrymple, psychiatrist and writer, who spent many years working in mental health fields and the prison service. He describes the permeation of materialistic ideologies of life into the very nature, individual human beings carry with them in their daily social interactions:

“The need always to lie and always to avoid the truth stripped everyone of what Cistine called ‘the two greatest gifts of God—the soul and the speech which communicates it.’ People became hypocritical, cunning, mistrustful, cynical, silent, cruel, and indifferent to the fate of others as a result of the destruction of their own souls.”

— Theodore Dalrymple, [Our Culture, What's Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses](#)

Such assessments of life are often far removed from the experience of those educated to dwell rather on the latest ideology or government inspired campaign. Actual therapeutic work, as many will surmise from common sense and life experience, is far from its academic theoretical description. On the other hand, and from a more positive point of view, attention to lived sensual experience as a source for living thinking has popularly grown in appreciation. “Mindfulness” has become a concept that has become now common place in society; it converts easily to an understanding of how a sense of “place” and “sense”, effects consciousness. Both contribute to etheric “effect”. That being, the effect of an event and a sensual impression, brought together in inner work, as active thinking on one’s experience. More closely expressed: Etheric in the sense of a feeling of and for a life sustaining energising feeling for one’s environment and one’s place in it.

A preliminary view of this etheric world might be built in two ways. One through calling to mind and consciousness a phenomenological, real living experience, and then an active working with what one experiences through thinking and feeling into this experience. For instance, we might recall the sense of sanctity, the pristine clear sound and beauty of nature in the early morning, – the dew on the grass, the colour of reflected spring green, sky blue, and silver on pools of water, and shimmering sun on a still sea. From a second orientation point, we might bring this sensual experience into our appreciation for active inner experience of ourselves, within new conceptions of time, space, movement. As souls and spirit within an environment of outer and inner experience. Active thinking and sensual experience can thereby fructify.

All this would be in contradistinction to the falling away the degradation and decay of some urban and more materialistic environments. But they wouldn’t have to be. One need only

contemplate the brutalism of housing estates erected in the last century, or look to the seeming obsession with box like housing structures that continue to this day. Maybe one should not be surprised to see an impulse for people to want to live in similar structures to their smart phones, would that we saw buildings with a few more rounded edges. But it seems on a deeper level people do need a reminder of what a place can and does do to the psyche. Whether it is a church, or a town square, a plaza, there is a view, the view of the town before us, or the view of the depictions of Christ, the saints and the angels in the paintings and sculptures presented before us. These are social settings; places for us to share with others, to recognise others, and where they stand in space, as part of the space before us. Yet there is joy too in seeing what has been done in recent years, in some communal urban settings, even from small stall holders, and various eateries, there seems to be a wish to establish spaces where people perceive each other, and the world around them, as places of harmony in which they would wish to indeed, just be.

It seems this kind of awareness is a phenomenon one may perceive spiritually of a wider more expansive sense of the etheric, where our gaze, our finer subtle sense for the environment breathes. Counterposed perhaps, to the dome that more materially exists wherever one comes, for example, into an environment of Wi-Fi. We may reflect, for all those office workers, or home workers, with their screens before them, the huge quantity of images we consume daily, the importance of the panorama, the view, the gaze, that leads one's consciousness out of oneself, into, indeed an *other*, is symptomatic of a human need.

The question arises how such a metaphorical no less imaginative dome around us might relate to, and act upon our will. For automata we would be if these sense impressions were not living etheric energies. And if this does, as one might surmise change consciousness, as I sit here, for example weaving these thoughts below this dome of Wi-Fi for example, as I feel it like a shell around me. I then also consciously feel this drive to counteract it and surpass it. But if I go out, into nature, into the sense world, hearing perhaps somehow the poetic call of the speech that names the world around me, there I come into an angelic experience, not even guessed at as I sit beneath the dome. And if I can then move from light to colour, to cloud and tree, and perceive myself from outside, and start a reverse journey, awakening to new living experience, a whole world of these angelic experiences can arise. Aware also imaginatively, that all around me there are these little domed houses, I am led to reflect: in all these little domed houses live also little domed people, like me, in this society, living life as it is deemed "daily life", i.e on the internet, working on computers, consuming media, etc. Technology as an extension of myself, indeed it is; but what part of myself? Does it reach out to others, through the ethers, or harden into fixed thoughts and ideas?

On the other hand, there are those esoteric practitioners who establish towers of crystal and wood to somehow offset such effects. These create a dome too, but one of protection. But invariably these experiences remain mystical. One says I will protect myself *with* an esoteric dome *against* those domes that are constructed by electrical currents and electromagnetic waves: *I shall construct a dome of healing energy around me*. There is a comfort to know in this action, that I can create a protective, a safe space, far from the encroachments of the modern world. And yet, how we interact and engage more deeply with etheric and spiritual experience can be found wanting. Until we perhaps take up meditation. Can we then dwell on the form and life of the *actual* crystal being before us; Or

the shape of the incense that curls around the altar before which we sit; The sound of the bell? If we do so, then we might have the means by which to delve a little deeper into what I would call "*etheric realms*".

What is it that carries us through the world? I think of my desire to go and get a take away dinner. Or my desire to get my hair cut. Perhaps a new dress, a new shirt. I imagine the action. It returns to me. It prompts and cajoles me until I do it. When I call this experience more fully inwardly to mind. This desire is like a fire being. It moves my limbs. If I go into this being - of myself as fire, if I experience this personalised fire of my own will in my limbs, I can come to experience this desire as red permeating the blue of my limbs; I see that my desires, whether daily or more broadly are what takes me through life. My feet press the ground beneath me. I feel the up press on my soles. My feet carry me through life in pursuit of my desires and aims. There is intuition here too. I may act, come back, reflect, think and learn from my experience of enacting this desire and then have an experience of how my next deeds relate to the deeds accomplished until now, until this moment in life. And all this happens rather naturally. As when we feel a coffee must follow a large meal, somehow incomplete without it, or when a dessert follows a main course, or perhaps when a job or change of life course must follow the new input to our lives, we receive through education of some sort. Each to his own, intuitive experience of what is right for each of our own inner fire being of will.

The Ich, the ego of another human being also forms an environment. Our interactions with parents, friends, teachers, as members of a society. All these also form us.

For many in Europe and slightly behind, the world over, this path through the nineteenth century saw the mass migration to cities, the descent into materialism, a rise in an environment of products, of shopping, of trade, of bourgeois society and urban living spaces. These in turn shape the relative strength or weakness of those people living in those societies. The other human being is thus a source of integration in an environment. *Significant others* are an environment as much as any material reality.

Let us return to the example of working with children, of what was called key workers. We might well reflect broadly and generally: who are the key workers in our lives? Who are the people who shape that environment of our very egos and karma? For the environment I have been describing, the children's parents were significant abusive "others", to whom, yet the children still had contact; often, in relationships that needed continued negotiation with the various state authorities.

We come thereby to second level, where we see that our will, our path in life has led us to a specific place in life. We may feel our embeddedness in a sensual environment, as much as an environment formed by soul forces and words of others within it, like a skin.

Again, not the skin, the screen a digital environment of photos and language on or through a screen, but a lived experience through a skin, as if stoked sensually by the impressions of one's surroundings. That question here is: can we raise our consciousness to hereby feel a different skin, an etheric one, extending over the environment of sensual expressions and words of others. Can we bring these experiences actively inwardly together? For this would

be an experience of the “*water ether*”, living within the forms around me, the sound forms, the shape forms, flowing as if in a sea of experience, rising swelling through the events of the day. In the children’s home, we reviewed the day, after the children had gone to bed. Recalling the events of the day; bringing to mind where this element of life energy had flowed through it.

As all of us, in review can look back and seek to identify where and what we have experienced, and with whom, we can so identify the contours and boundaries of where our soul ends and another begins. This is vital work for children who have experienced the invasion and dissolving of boundaries between themselves and the adults in their environment. Following reflection, and ordering of events, and then, etherically, to distinguish the forms with which we have interacted through the day, or through life (in a deeper retrospective), we can behold the “*air ether*” as that which fills our soul. Such reflection, fills the air with thinking, as the thoughts which we bring to the experience of events.

Holding this experience as an act of will is holding consciousness of the I, within the weaving of our intellectual and mind soul. This leads us deeper into an experience of the warmth of our own soul.



There is something wonderfully sensual here as much as deeply rich for etheric experience of our own soul as it lives in the body. In the Bible, the conscious appreciation of our own etheric warmth, in the soul, in the body, can be imagined in the visit of the Mary to

Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). Summary: Mary had gone to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. When Mary entered the house and called a greeting, Elizabeth felt her baby move within her. Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit exclaims "You are the most blessed of all women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" She went on to say that her baby jumped with gladness at the sound of Mary's voice. This sense for inner warmth I would like to set against this experience of the modern technological dome experience, mentioned above. It is something touchingly intimate. Something one may experience in inner work and meditation.

If one has followed the paths described through the first three ethers, one may here experience, one's own soul as within a dark cave, a living warm space, like a womb.

Is it not careful consideration of others, of life, of environment, that nurtures this warm space? When we sit and review what is to be done, when we seek understanding with others for the shaping of our paths through life – when we turn off those devices – are these not the times we are actually waiting for? When the fire being of our desires, in our limbs, has brought us to those soul interactions where warmth between souls may arise? From the ethers of earth, to water, to air, to warmth. Perhaps this is the instinct that lies, albeit often unconscious, in those wasted hours of incessant power point presentations, so often lamented in business and corporate settings. However, the instinct to come together with others is there. To simply feel warmth, soul warmth, as the meeting's *raison d'être*.

And the more we reflect and press forward such enquiries, the more this experience raises active thinking. We see that spiritually, thinking itself has light, which embodies colour and life. How richer this is than the dead colours of photo, or computer graphic. And again, this raises our appreciation of the environment. Why is it we see the care of a garden, of a flower, of a carefully placed work of real art on a wall here as of vital import? Perhaps again we could live into that experience of ourselves, as if a baby in a womb. Do we hear in imaginative reflection inwardly on life, the call of our own Holy Spirit, as that which thinks into the soul warmth of itself and others and sees the play of colours before it around it?

Indeed, we could pursue this template. One side phenomenological, one side in active thinking. The two indeed together, fructify. But it seems so little time is given over to such processes. For here a materialistic conception of life falters and struggles. And yet in psychology and in popular culture learning to characterise what one sees spiritually, continually gains ground.

Would that we overcome the incessant passivity we are lulled into. Be it through advertising, consumerism, news, music, is not the need we all sense – as vacancy in the middle, and exasperation at the trials and pressures of life – not this: the need to rouse ourselves to inner thinking activity? For this was what we as adults had aimed to do in our work with our children. We had to first overcome our own passivity to simply impose a set of rules and regulations, we had to overcome our resistance to really engage. Of course, we had professionals on hand to help with this. We would sit there with family maps, and brainstorm solutions, with psychiatrist reports and stories from our own observations of the children. Plans would be drawn up, tasks and challenges identified.

It's a metaphor I know, and on my part a little nostalgic, but also, I feel poignant: do we as adults find this kind of engagement in life, the strategic spiritual and psychological support to help us step forward, in life?

Anthroposophically speaking, the "chemical ether" is that which we feel as a laming force in the blood. This laming would lull us to sleep without reflection on these mysteries of daily life. Lame therefore to further awakening to spiritual reality around us. And perhaps even more hidden and unspoken of in modern culture, indeed still rather taboo in western societies, is the final ether, the "life ether".

When Rudolf Steiner speaks of this overcoming of the chemical ether, and the rousing of ourselves to inner thinking activity, this helps us perceive the life ether, or in other words, those spirits "who approach us after death".

This is far less alien to those who have been through difficult experiences, crises, and addictions in life, than those who haven't. For those who have been through confrontation with the depths of their own psyche, such beings have become known to them. Perhaps the experience just needs one revealing prompt from another empathic person, to us. It seems to me this is the wider truth of etheric life, to perceive these beings that meet us after death, as much as those we live in etheric space with. Thus, in light of this milieu, this environment I am here describing, slowly, we orient ourselves to this etheric space. And we do this in an opposite direction to, in spite of, but within the normal materialistic culture.

In this new world we create, the other, as a concept itself resurrects. And that other, is no longer just the other of the human being standing before me, but a world of spiritual beings, as they exist through the realms of nature, through the different seven ethers, through the colours, sights and sounds of my environment. What this world speaks can be at odds with the outer reality, but invariably seeks harmony. These principles are living realities. But they get neglected.

These for me were some of the reflections that came to me as I left my own Wi-Fi dome this morning, and felt wonder at just what other kinds of milieu might be possible. These were the thoughts that came on reflection, after breathing within the colour, the sun, and the light. Plus, the feeling of the need to set them down on paper. This is something which I would like to think would go in the direction of an appreciation of what one might call the milieu of the seven ethers.