

## Reflection

# Weathering the storm: Reflecting on the usefulness of psychotherapy in troubled times; the origins of the Guntrip Trust and the resources it offers those in ministry

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Fifteen years into parish ministry, while involved pastorally with a particularly tragic bereavement, unexpectedly, I found myself becoming distracted by aspects of the situation affecting me in ways I had not foreseen. Pushing these concerns to the back of my mind, I determined to focus on the job in hand. It was not until sometime later that my anxiety returned, to the extent that it would interrupt concentration, easily divert attention and leave me feeling troubled, unsettled, nervous, at times wondering even if my anxiety could begin to undermine everything. It was a scary time.

Concerned that, were I to ignore those feelings of unease, my own mental health could be jeopardised, I decided to confide in a trusted colleague. The magnitude of taking that step cannot be underestimated. It was to acknowledge that something was awry and was asking to be addressed. It was also one of those warning signs in life that, if ignored, could be dangerous and might even have fateful consequences – and not just for

oneself. It was an uncomfortable moment of realisation, the like of which tells us we need to reach out and ask for help; that to try and go it alone will not be enough, that there is no shame in acknowledging vulnerability.

After listening with concern, my colleague enquired whether I had ever considered engaging in psychotherapy, adding it might be possible to receive financial assistance towards therapist fees, from ‘The Guntrip Trust’. Thus began my acquaintance with Harry Guntrip (1901–1975) and the Trust that bears his name – the start of a thirty-year odyssey, which continues with me currently serving as its Chair.

So, who was Harry Guntrip? Guntrip began his working life as a Congregational minister in Leeds, going on to become one of the leading British psychoanalytic practitioners and thinkers of the twentieth century, gaining an international reputation. Christian faith was central to his life. Often in demand as a speaker, writer and broadcaster, he reflected deeply on the intersections between religion and psychotherapy. In his book, *Mental Pain and the Cure of Souls*, later published in the United States under the title *Psychotherapy and Religion: The Constructive Use of Inner Conflict*, he wrote, ‘Psychotherapy is evidently a truly religious experience and religion at its maturest is the fullest attainment of the aims of psychotherapy.’<sup>1</sup> There is little doubt ‘Guntrip regarded religion and psychotherapy as two closely intertwined processes’.<sup>2</sup>

Unusually, for a professional in the field, Guntrip wrote extensively about his own personal difficulties, including detailed accounts of his psychoanalytic treatment with Ronald Fairbairn and Donald Winnicott, two leading British analysts of the time. In his authorised biography, Jeremy Hazell<sup>3</sup> offers an absorbing personal history, as well as a detailed account, drawn from Guntrip’s own extraordinary record of his own analyses.

Inna Rosentsvit captures the essence of Harry Guntrip’s significance:

Guntrip’s early childhood was marked by profound trauma: the death of his younger brother Percy when Harry was three and a half, and a mother whose emotional unavailability left deep scars of

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<sup>1</sup> *Mental Pain and the Cure of Souls* (Independent Press, 1956), 199.

<sup>2</sup> Hendrika Vande Kemp, “Harry Guntrip’s *Mental Pain and the Cure of Souls* (1956): An Essay Review”, *Psyche en Geloof* 16, no. 1 (2005): 59.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Hazell, *H. J. S. Guntrip, A Psychoanalytical Biography* (Free Association Books, 1996).

abandonment and rage. These early experiences of loss and maternal rejection haunted Guntrip throughout his life, becoming the organizing themes of both his suffering and his intellectual quest. [...]

When he encountered psychoanalysis in the 1930s, he found a new language for the spiritual and emotional questions that had always consumed him. [...]

His story reminds us that psychoanalysis is not only a profession but a vocation – a commitment to know oneself as deeply as one seeks to know others. In making his inner life visible, Guntrip offered future generations of analysts and patients a gift: the knowledge that vulnerability, when honestly engaged, can become a source of wisdom and connection.<sup>4</sup>

Being a minister and available to provide pastoral care almost unremittingly is no easy task or calling. It requires disciplined self-care and a mature understanding of the self, within the complex milieu of personal relations. Navigating differing or conflicting viewpoints with sensitivity, is an exacting skill ministers must acquire and learn how to nurture. I recall, in the early days of being in parish ministry, a colleague expressing with surprise how he considered himself to be ‘a not unreasonable person’, yet still people would choose to fall out with him. These kinds of demands take their toll and require maturity of temperament and disposition to withstand and survive.

Creating a safe space, in the company of a trusted friend or colleague, where it is possible to off-load without fear of judgement or rejection, can be a lifesaver at moments of real difficulty or complexity. For some engaged in the day-to-day work of ministry, meaningful support can be found through various forms of counselling and psychotherapy, along with spiritual direction and supportive supervision or consultation.

Sometimes, however, issues arise that call for deeper exploration of the emotional life, much of which can be complex and remain unconscious in our day-to-day lives. This is where psychodynamic counselling or psychoanalytic psychotherapy can help. For example, the person who has a

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<sup>4</sup> Inna Rosentsvit, “Introduction to Harry Guntrip—the Analyst Who Turned His Inner Life into a Gift to Psychoanalysis”, Psychobiography Reading Group meeting dedicated to Harry Guntrip, *Psychohistory Forum*, February 2026.

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propensity to react angrily on impulse and can trace back into childhood difficulties in dealing with deeply felt emotion and feelings, may benefit from thinking about the unconscious processes that affect how we behave.

In this form of therapy, the relationship with the therapist is central. The individual is supported to explore the roots of his or her difficulties within a supportive and consistent relationship, that can sometimes continue for a considerable period of time. This can lead to greater self-understanding and change, and thus to the possibility of significant personal and professional fulfilment.

Not everyone needs or wants to enter into this form of sustained and deeply personal work. Occasionally it may be helpful for individuals to meet with others in a work-related reflective practice group. This supportive method allows participants to talk about their work in a non-judgemental and in-depth manner. It has as its aim the discovery of meaning, and the role of the unconscious in daily life, and allows individuals to reflect on problematic situations in new and creative ways.

For instance, a mother recalled having been oblivious to her child's lisp until it was pointed out to her. She recognised that it had been a 'blind spot'. This led to a reflection on collective blind spots. Maybe seeing the church we love failing (losing membership, losing money, losing its way) has been too painful to see, far less address, until it feels as if we are at the cliff edge, and we have to address it. Accepting collective responsibility, instead of looking for somewhere to lay blame, might make it possible still to hold hope for the future and find constructive ways of getting there.

In these and other ways, the Guntrip Trust offers practical assistance and help.

The Trust exists to provide support and financial assistance to individuals, ordained or non-ordained, who choose to explore psychological problems or inter-personal dynamics in the deeply reflective ways outlined above. Recipients of bursaries must be fulfilling a designated ministerial role within the Christian church or other faith traditions, and reside in Scotland or the North of England within the Anglican Province of York.

Named, in honour of Harry Guntrip's pioneering work, the Trust was set up in the late 1980s by Murray Leishman, a Church of Scotland minister who himself became a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, at a time when there was widespread evidence of ministers and clergy under stress. In the early years, the Trust was enabled through its close relationship with the former Scottish Institute of Human Relations. Since the closure of the

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Institute in 2012, the Guntrip Trust has continued the same ethos of psychoanalytically informed psychological support for those working in religious life.

This has been offered in the following ways: the provision of bursaries to support access to psychodynamic/psychoanalytic therapy and training; the development of work-based learning and application groups, led by a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and a minister; ongoing research into particular areas of concern in the pastoral field; lectures and conferences. Further information can be found on its website: [www.guntriptrust.com](http://www.guntriptrust.com).

Trustees (ministers, psychotherapists and others), currently representing the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland are very aware of the wide-ranging and sometimes conflicting pressures under which people engaged in ministry live and work from day to day, whilst facing times of accelerating change in both church and society.

These are tough times when ever more is being asked of ministers and members, as people are forced to face a different reality from the one they have known; having to deal with rapidly ageing and dwindling congregations, amalgamations, the closure and sale of loved buildings, the development of new forms of ministry; not to mention unsettling feelings of disenfranchisement and of being distanced from ultimate decision-making.

Consequently, people may be drawing on already depleted reserves of energy, resourcefulness and faith, sometimes feeling they have not much more to give. In ministry, where the use of self is central to what we have to offer, particularly in times of loss and transformation, recognising where, when and how we may replenish and revive the soul can be crucial.

It is also true that those who have had a more secure and hopeful start in life are able (usually) to respond to life problems and challenges in a more confident way and to retain more optimism than those who have experienced earlier difficulties. Likewise, if our personal life is difficult (through bereavement, job loss, or divorce for example), it can be much tougher facing problems in our work life. This is especially true in ministry, which is so much more than just a job.

Importantly, Harry Guntrip believed that it was never too late to embark upon the inward journey.

At the time of writing, I am tentatively entering into a further period of psychotherapy, triggered by family circumstance, hoping to understand

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better those feelings and reactions which have a nasty habit of disturbing and interrupting life's routine. There is no predicting the outcome. Yet, I set out in good faith, thankful for the wisdom and connection psychotherapy has gifted me in the past, convinced of its usefulness in troubled times.

The Welsh poet and minister R. S. Thomas once suggested 'the best journey to make is inward'.<sup>5</sup> It can be regenerative, creative, even salvific.

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<sup>5</sup> "Groping" in R. S. Thomas: *Selected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (Everyman's Poetry; J. M. Dent, 1996).