

THE PERSON CENTERED APPROACH TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

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There's an old Chinese saying: When you drink water from the well—don't forget the people who dug the well. Among the many people who have dug the well from which I have drunk for this paper I remember Carl Rogers, Ernie Meadows, Soren Kierkegaard and Will Stillwell.

In my paper I will discuss the difference between conflict resolution and conflict transformation/I will offer a definition of conflict/I will offer some comments on how I have come to see PCA as a set of skills/and finally—in the context of the framework of the above three points—I will present a vision of how PCA can help a person handle the conflict in their life effectively/efficiently/responsibly/and with optimum relationship satisfaction.

I distinguish between conflict resolution and conflict transformation. I see conflict resolution as implying that all human relationships can be made harmonious. It is to this notion that I offer the alternative of conflict transformation—which assumes that much of our relationship life is full of contradictory demands requiring agonizing choices—and that responsible relationships are fraught with anxiety requiring courage.

Conflict resolution implies a totalized outcome where there has been a mediation of either/or differences. With "conflict transformation" either/or differences are held in creative tension. The task of "conflict resolution" is to eliminate the anxiety through mediated synthesis. With "conflict transformation" the task becomes one of demonstrating courage in the face of the anxiety of the unmediated either/or rather than an attempt to eliminate the anxiety.

With conflict resolution—as I am viewing the term—life becomes easier but at the cost of a person's full humanity. With conflict transformation—life becomes more difficult—but with the reward of complete, fully functioning, humanity. The life of conflict resolution is cluttered with compromises which gains a little peace—and loses a little integrity. The compromises of giving in/giving up/and give and take are the typical strategies of conflict resolution. Courage, responsibility and congruence are the qualities required for conflict transformation. From the standpoint of conflict resolution the issue is stated "conflict with the other", "what are my rights", "what are the right answers", and "manoeuvring to escape the truth about myself." On the other hand from the standpoint of conflict transformation these issues are presented in terms of "conflict with myself", "what is my responsibility", and "courageously seeking to be myself."

And now to a definition of conflict: conflict simply defined/is a difference that is not OK. If I am going to vote for candidate A and my wife is going to vote for candidate B—there is a difference here that is OK with me—thus/no conflict. If this difference is not OK with my wife—then she has a conflict about this. If she offers me hostility about this—I may see an issue with the hostility that is not OK with me/thus a conflict. This latter is a different conflict than the one about the differences between our voting choices. I call the first a "content" conflict and the latter a "relationship conflict." It is important to know what is going on—who has the issue that is not OK with them/what are the content issues/what are the relationship issues. It is important not to get these issues mixed up. Unfortunately—we do get them mixed up. One person is arguing about the content—the other person is arguing about the relationship—and they keep shifting levels randomly and inconsistently—and the conversation

becomes crazy—with each party to the conflict feeling innocent and right—and believing the other to be guilty and wrong. Knowing what is going on amidst the anxiety is a difficult and necessary thing to know. It requires courage to ask the right question when your ego is seeking to demand the right answer. Finally—the person with the issue is responsible for dealing with their own issue without depending on the other to change. In the end I want my own integrity and I want to have satisfying relationships. This will often involve an anxious embracing of paradoxical tension. The person centered approach offers necessary and sufficient conditions for the embracing of paradox and the successful and satisfying handling of conflict.

First some background comments about the person centered approach. PCA was discovered and developed by Carl Rogers as a client centered therapy which emerged ultimately to being applied to relationships in general as well as therapy. PCA is a profound doctrine which offers the necessary and sufficient conditions for the successful conduct of relationships. With therapy—the task is one of helping the other become congruent by offering the client the three conditions—usually in exchange for money. With relationships in general—the task is help one's self to have satisfying and successful relationships on behalf of one's self—though the other may benefit as well. PCA is an "approach" to having satisfying relationships. It is seen in various lights—as attitudes, as skills, as a way of life—and perhaps other ways. Being such a profound doctrine—it resists being overly confined to any one framework. I am seeing PCA as a set of skills as compared to a value set; PCA is a set of skills which can be used by people with many different values towards the conduct of satisfying and successful relationships. If PCA is seen as a value set—there is the ever present danger of coercion to "do it right."

While I understand and appreciate that there are many ways to view PCA—from here on—I will be considering PCA only from the standpoint of seeing it as a set of skills to be used at will for fostering successful and satisfying relationships.

Here are two stories which will exemplify what I am getting at. At the place where I get my hair styled—often I am dissatisfied with the volume level of the music. It is too loud for my tastes. One day several months ago—I asked the owner to turn it down. I had asked many times before—and she would turn the music down—reluctantly. The same happened on this day several months ago. I felt hurt and angry at this response—which seemed unusually reluctant on this day. So I said defensively: "It seems like it is a problem for you to turn the music down." She snapped back: "Well—you are the only customer that has a problem with it." I thought about leaving immediately and never coming back. But I self-consciously went through the hair style—and left vowing not to come back.

I left feeling incompetent in my relationships and with my PCA skills.

Being quite satisfied with everything else except the music—and wanting to get more competent with my PCA skills—I rescheduled the next time I needed a cut. The next few visits went without incident. In fact—it seemed like the owner was somewhat remorseful for the previous encounter. But then—only a few days ago—the music was unusually loud. I thought—"Well—maybe I won't say anything." But this was surely not congruent in any way. I knew that my temptation to say nothing was out of fear of the interpersonal consequences. I hated my cowardice—my temptation to have peace of mind at the expense of my humanity. I was determined to be impeccably congruent in this situation. I decided to choose the skill of PCA congruence—which means I responsibly state my clear truth—and have no expectation that the other change. I anticipated that she would not like this—and would manifest her reluctance. And I was ready for this with the skills of empathy and unconditional positive regard. I determined in advance that I would receive her in some way—and that I would not leave as a coward.

If I did leave—it would be a responsible choice. So—here's what I said: "The music is too loud for me. I'd appreciate it if you would turn it down." You could see her wince and she said: "You don't like my mellow rock station." She turned the music down. The issue for me was not the type of music—but the volume. But I did not get into that. I said: "Well—I appreciate that you heard me and I am glad that the music is lower." And I went from the shampoo chair to the regular chair. While in the regular chair—I decided to really prize her reluctance to turn the music down using the skill of unconditional positive regard. I said: "I imagine that I'm the only customer that has a problem with the music volume." I was attempting to offer some prizing of her position which she revealed to me from the earlier visit. I said this without rancor—and with great caring—but not in any way feeling compromising in my integrity about how I preferred the level of the music. Her response was: "Well—you're the only customer who has spoken to me about it." There was a smile on her face. Our connection was good. I could not help but think: "She is really taking this in." It was a good haircut. The conversation was good. I didn't feel like a coward. I left with a light foot. I felt competent.

I claim in all of the above that I used the skills of PCA. The skill of congruence by revealing myself in the face of some anticipated unpleasantness. And the skill of unconditional positive regard when my integrity was threatened. I could have used the skill of empathic listening to understand her position better. While I believe that the owner felt heard and understood—I did not consciously choose empathic listening as the skill of choice.

I did not use the strategies of persecution—rescue—or victim. If I had demanded that she turn down the music—that's aggressive persecution. If I said "Oh—it's all right"—I am rescuing. If I leave in a huff—or sulk during the haircut—I am being victim. All are powerless—irresponsible—strategies. These two stories are foundational conflict stories for me. The issues come up over and over again. The roots are deep. And PCA—when I choose to use it—helps me through the dark moments. Differences are inevitable. Incongruence is optional. And where there is incongruence—the handling of conflict is apt to be unsuccessful and unsatisfying. Where there is congruence and full acceptance of responsibility for your issue that is not OK—conflict can be handled efficiently, effectively, and with satisfaction. If you are able to remain congruent—like a pyramid—with all three of your sides touching the ground—you will be positioned to do person centered conflict transformation.

I conclude with some special emphasis on the use of the skill of unconditional positive regard as an especially important skill in conflict transformation. There was a study done by Leadership 2000 that creativity requires that both hemispheres of the brain be engaged with blood. And that in the presence of judgement—the hemispheres empty out—and only the brain stem is full of blood. This both hemisphere engorgement is especially important when it comes to paradox—the ability to embrace anxiety producing either/or's and hold them in tension together with courage.

So—when I feel the threat of the other—my job becomes: how can I remain committed to the threatening differences of the other and remain totally committed to my own integrity? Or—how can I embrace the paradox of both prizing myself AND prizing the gifts of the other.

There is an old saying about hating the behavior and loving the person. What I am talking about assumes that the love for the person is not in question. Or better—love of the person is not an issue I am dealing with here. My issue is—rather—the prizing of the opposition of the other as a precious gift—not resisting the opposition nor attempting to change it in any way. To make a friend of the opposition of the other. So I am not talking about loving the person and hating the behavior. I am talking about prizing the "behavior." I am talking about prizing the threatening opposition of the other which while framed as something "bad" or "sinful" remains an unassimilated weapon of the perceived enemy—evoking the diminished capacity of the radically disgorged brain.

In a work situation—especially in a leadership position—a person cannot afford to operate at this diminished capacity. So how can PCA help me deal with the situation where I am faced with an other who has a difference that is not OK with him—thus an other who has a conflict AND where I feel threatened with this expression of the other about his conflict with me?

My task—should I choose it—is the skill of unconditional positive regard. With the skill of unconditional positive regard I am able to prize the threatening difference of the other as a precious gift—to make the threatening opposition a friend. In prizing the gift of the other's difference I am letting it in—neither changing the gift nor changing my own integrity. There is a sense where I see most if not all of reality as paradoxical. Surely this is a great paradox to be able to prize the very thing that threatens me—while not giving up any of my integrity. He who embraces paradox embraces reality.

Carl Rogers did some early work on maturity where he describes seven capacities of the mature person. Two of those capacities were: the capacity to prize yourself and the ability to prize the other. To do these both at once when the other opposes you is paradoxical.

In the work situation—work gets done through relationships. PCA offers necessary and sufficient conditions for the successful conduct of relationships at work. In a milieu of blame and fault—relationships are ineffective, inefficient and unsatisfying. Through using PCA relationships can become more efficient, effective and satisfying. When a person is skilful with PCA they are more congruent and are apt to have fewer conflicts which are evoked by the unclarity of incongruence.

And when there is a conflict—the person competent in PCA is able to frame the issue in a responsible way—not dependent on changes in the other. The competent person does not demand—defer—defect or compromise his integrity. In place of these victimizing—persecuting—and rescuing strategies—the person competent in PCA used PCA skills—especially the receiving skills of empathy, empathic listening and unconditional positive regard to deal with his task of getting what he wants, maintaining satisfying relationships, and not getting stuck in the conflicts of the other. A final story. Several years ago—and elderly cousin saw me underlining passages in a book I had just purchased. My cousin—being a frugal person who grew up during the depression—expressed shock at seeing me do this. Immediately I felt the pressure of criticism and disapproval. I began to take offence and feel stuck. Then I decided to use unconditional positive regard. I said: "I can imagine that you think that what I am doing is a terrible way to be a good steward of property." She immediately relaxed and said:

"Well—I guess most scholars underline in their books." Whether I am a scholar is perhaps up for question—a student perhaps. More importantly—I did not remain stuck with my cousin. Unconditional positive regard was a skill that I was able and willing to use.

In summary: the three skills of the person centered approach to relationships—congruence/empathic following and understanding/and unconditional positive regard are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the conduct of successful and satisfying relationships. These are three skills that can be learned. Even a small level of skill with the three skills may dramatically increase relationship satisfaction. Imagine a relationship or a work-place of relationships—where there was a preponderance of clarity/integrity/commitment/listening/and a prizing of differences. The person centered approach is also a life-time discipline which can bring profound personal and professional rewards to the person committed to deep levels of personal development.