

A Review of

The Human Being Fully Alive: Writings in Celebration of Brian Thorne – Sometimes This Atheist Calls it Courage

Edited by Jeff Leonardi

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While advertised as a festschrift to Brian Thorne, Jeff Leonardi's request to contributors of essays contained in *The Human Being Fully Alive* was that they address themes in Thorne's life work that relate to the contributor's own personal development, work and thought. The result is a collection of interesting essays by eight experienced therapists. In addition to editing, Leonardi authored the book's introduction and one of its eight chapters.

In addition to being a person-centered counselor, trainer, and supervisor, Leonardi is an ordained priest in the Church of England. He met both Carl Rogers and Brian Thorne at a person-centered workshop in Spain in 1979. His relationship with Thorne developed through a variety of person-centered contexts, culminating, in part, with Thorne accompanying him as supervisor through nine years of study for his dissertation, entitled "Partners or Adversaries: Christianity and the Person-centered Approach."

Thorne, as teacher, counselor, group facilitator, trainer, supervisor, director of a counseling agency, lecturer and spiritual companion, has influenced many person-centered practitioners. He has authored or edited 19 books. Both men have many more professional, person-centered accomplishments than I have listed here.

Leonardi suggests that Thorne's most distinctive contribution to the person-centered approach is his recognition and further development of its spiritual dimension. Thorne introduced the concept of intimacy, later called "the quality of tenderness" into person-centered discussion and suggested augmenting the necessary and sufficient Rogerian conditions with this quality. Thorne describes it:

It seems as if for a space, however brief, two human beings are fully alive, because they have given themselves and each other permission to risk being fully alive. At such a moment, I have no hesitation in saying that my client and I are caught up in a stream of love. Within this stream, there comes an effortless or intuitive understanding and what is astonishing is how complex this understanding can be. It sometimes seems that I receive my client whole and thereafter possess a knowledge of him or her which does not depend on biographical data. This understanding is intensely personal and invariably it affects the self-perception of the client and can lead to marked changes in attitude and behavior. (Thorne, 1991, p. 77, quoted by Leonardi, p. 3)

Leonardi reminds his readers that Thorne's concept of the "quality of tenderness" is not unlike Rogers' (Baldwin, 1987; Rogers, 1980, p. 129; 1986) own allusions to a healing way of being, moments of unself-conscious, total engagement with the other person, moments that might be characterized as transcendent or in an altered state, that can occur in moments of significant connectedness and that can amount to a profoundly healing way of being.

Echoes of this concept, near or distant approximations, can be found in Oliver Bown's long memo cited by Rogers (1951, pp. 160-171), a poem and chapter by Jerold Bozarth (1998, p. iii, and pp. 95-101), a poem by Armin Klein (2001), an essay by Moon and Rice (2012), and Barbara Brodley's concept of "Client-Centered Therapy: An Expressive Therapy" (2011a), alongside her "Reasons for Responses Expressing the Therapist's Frame of Reference in Client-Centered Therapy" (2011b). As Bert Rice and I said:

Immersion in the other person's experience in combination with respect for the person's self-direction can lead a therapist into surprising interactions and situations as well as challenges to how a therapist thinks about the way she works. (Moon & Rice, 2012, p. 295)

In his chapter of the book, "What We are Meant to Be – Evolution as the Transformation of Consciousness," Leonardi writes:

Christianity makes the audacious claim that divinity was capable of being expressed in one human being, Jesus Christ, who is the forerunner or template of redeemed humanity... to try to understand this one human being is simultaneously to engage with understanding the divine. (p. 6)

He relates this Christian theme to the Rogerian template of "Persons of Tomorrow" (Rogers, 1980), the actualizing tendency, and the ideal of the fully functioning person. He discusses his reconciliation between science and divine design, and he invokes the concept of mystery and not-knowing in Christianity (see also Purton, Chapter 6).

Although I am an atheist, I was quite moved by Leonardi's discussion of Teilhard de Chardin's writings and also by the Eastern Orthodox tradition's extra focus upon *theosis*: "God became human so that humans may become God" (Leonardi, p. 66; Markides, 2001, p. 117).

My atheist association to this concept is expressed by Alfred North Whitehead:

...God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical properties... He is their chief exemplification.... the image under which this operative growth of God's nature is best conceived, is that of a tender care that nothing be lost. (1978, pp. 343-346)

For me, the leap to *empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard* is directly at hand.

Jan Hawkins' chapter is titled "Walking the Talk: Potent Therapy is a Risky Business." This chapter helped me to think about the man, Brian Thorne, about whom this book is attendant and also helped me enter into the themes of the other chapters, themes toward which I have often felt, at best, impatience. Hawkins' description of the way she works resonates with my own therapeutic values of an essential respect and acceptance of the other, empathic understanding, and therapist self-knowing and continuous self-development. She writes of times of deep healing and discusses the therapeutic value of having the courage to experience the inevitable depth of shared

awareness and feeling that occurs in the client-centered/person-centered relationship.

She discusses her long relationship with Thorne, his trustworthiness and the esteem in which she holds him. Of interest to some will be her discussion of a controversial, clinical choice made and published by Thorne (1987). In the course of couples therapy that segued into individual therapy, Thorne and the client Sally were both naked during one session. Thorne's agreement to have the session in this manner occurred after frequent, prolonged requests by the client, much discussion, and empathic understanding by Thorne of why the client felt so intensely that such a session would be helpful to her in her healing. In part because of Hawkins' acknowledgement of the pause she feels towards Thorne's choice with Sally, the chapter is a moving defense of this case study for which many have condemned him. My own, extremely distanced, take on this matter had been "yes" to what Thorne wrote, with the caveat "but I would never do that!" Reading the chapter by Hawkins helped me to deepen the "yes" I experienced when reading Thorne and to accept our shared human frailty, vulnerability, power over each other, life under the sway of each other, mutual dependence, therapist responsibility, and the unceasing mystery as to what is best (see also Purton, chapter 6). Hawkins quotes W. H. Auden (2007, p. 105): "We must love one another or die." I ask, "Where and how does a therapist land amidst all this?"

Hawkins' insistence upon therapist self-development alongside awareness of therapist responsibility and compassion aided me in resolving the tension I feel with other readings in this book. As I gain more experience, I become more and more who I am as a practitioner. While my temperament, as well as my "attitude and orientation" (Rogers, 1951, p. 19-64) sends me in a personal direction in my work (Moon, 2005; Moon & Rice, 2012), temperament and a similar or different personal position sends another in a different direction in her work.

For purposes of this review, at issue for me is the question of whether or not the theoretical stances of the "Person-Centered" therapists in this book are in the tradition of the Rogerian conditions or not; are they *systematically* adding redundancies that detract from the essential element of Rogerian theory – *unquestioning trust in the client and respect for the self-authority of the sovereign, existential other*

person? What is further at issue for me is whether or not “person-centered” literature is clear as opposed to misleading in relation to the author’s basic intentions versus those of Rogers. What I personally care about in reading “person-centered” literature is whether or not it is educative or destructive of an on-going understanding of an idea that, at least at one time, was a clear as well as exquisitely enunciated theoretical statement (Rogers, 1951, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1980, 1986, 1987).

I was surprised to find chapters by Mia Leijssen, Judy Moore and Allison Shoemark, and Campbell Purton mixing focusing and/or mindfulness (and Buddhism) in with their addressing of the theme of spirituality. In conversation with Paula Newman (personal communication, March 4, 2015), I have since come to understand that this is not uncommon. Through broadening definitions of spirituality, whether more international in scope, inter-religious, psychological or anthropological, the word is sometimes used to encompass that which is inarticulate, rising or transcendent in psycho-emotional and physical experiencing (Hinterkopf, 1998).

Mia Leijssen's chapter, “Caring for the Soul as the Keystone in Health Care,” lists different paths for connecting to that which is larger than we are. Her chapter is about health care and her own life-derived beliefs. Her trajectory for healing through counseling begins with Rogers’ core conditions, and through “presence,” as described by Rogers, possibly then through spiritual experience, concludes in a holistic tendency to arrive at and into loving and caring being with others. She views focusing as a path for creating a therapeutic environment where the person can be with himself, between consciousness and soul, in dialog with self, and with openness to the divine. Focusing attends to that which is bodily felt and it serves as an anchor as well as an aid in the healing process. On the one hand, her chapter seemed to relate to the idea of Rogers’ “persons of tomorrow,” and on the other, it seemed to be communicating a belief system and agenda determined by the healer.

The chapter by Judy Moore and Alison Shoemark, “Mindfulness and the Person-Centred Approach,” draws upon the use of mindfulness and focusing. An aspect of these practices is that some therapists who appreciate them as particularly facilitative for self-knowing, implement them more upon themselves in the interest of therapist congruence on behalf of the client than necessarily

suggesting them to the client for the client. For me, while these practices make sense as described by these very experienced practitioners, I became a bit confused as to whether or not a valuing of one or some ways of a client's being or becoming is viewed as more facilitative for growth than others.

In his chapter, "Spirituality, Focusing and the Truth Beyond Concepts," Campbell Purton discusses his spiritual and mystical view of life, the world, and how we can improve upon the way we live our lives. He relates focusing to spirituality, and discusses a "truth beyond concepts" that he views as "more important than our conceptual truths" (p. 113). While addressing questions of how we think about things, he uses an example from science and then says: "It is *that which is formulated in different ways* by Aristotle, Newton, Einstein and possible future scientists. The *something* that is formulated in different ways is the reality" (p. 117). I enjoyed the clarity and exposition of Purton's writing style. If one were to choose to read further on the subject of focusing, beyond the philosophical and theoretical writings of Eugene Gendlin, based upon my reading of this chapter, I would look next to Purton.

I quite enjoyed Dave Mearns' chapter, "On Faith and Nihilism: A Considerable Relationship." Mearns chafes at the imposition of messianic religious or other presses upon the individual. He references Carlos Castaneda (1971) as he writes that in a world without anchor for meaning or reality, we are left to choose what matters to us and embark on our own "controlled fully." In relation to therapy and the person-centered approach, Mearns has previously written:

Yet, the reality for the person-centered therapist is that when we properly enter the existential Self of another we find ourselves simply admiring the tenacity and the beauty of the human's survival. At this point we have stopped being a representative of even the subtle "social control" forces within our society. We have entered the territory where nihilism and divinity meet. (Mearns & Thorne, 2006, p. 57)

In discussion of his and Mick Cooper's approach to therapy (see Mearns & Cooper, 2005), Mearns says:

There is nothing new in relational depth other than Rogers' core conditions in powerful combination, except that it demands that the therapist does not settle for a dilution of those conditions. (p. 86)

Speaking for myself, I imagine that the accuracy of this assertion lies in the fluid or systematic intentionality and ever-shifting congruence of each therapist.

Peter Schmid's chapter, "The Person and Evil," offers an overview of Western philosophical, Christian, psychiatric, existential and anthropological thought around the question of whence comes evil. He says that in person-centered thought, psychological freedom allows for evil choices, a situation that, according to Rogers, requires addressing in psychotherapy; for Schmid, within the person-centered approach, it requires addressing in the practice of encounter psychotherapy. He asserts, that at times, this requires the practice of *conditional*, as opposed to *unconditional*, positive regard (p. 145). Though he references Rogers along the way of his argument, here it is clear that Schmid is writing a theoretical change into person-centered theory, an interesting one, and in this case a clearly articulated one. I find this chapter to be the clearest exposition of his thinking that I have read.

In their respective chapters, both Schmid (p.139) and Mearns (p. 84) write somewhat disparagingly of classical client-centered practitioners who don't confront their clients. It strikes me that they are making assumptions about the motivations of a broad swathe of practitioners. This reviewer speculates that these two writers, in the years subsequent to their own respective arrivals at mature practice, have been under-exposed to the work of mature client-centered therapists who have developed an integrated necessary meld of the practiced attitudes in order to feel fluent and psychologically free within the therapeutic relationship.

I arrived at the subtitle of this review, "This Atheist Calls it Courage," in response to Hawkins' discussion of Thorne's challenging case and her discussion of therapist self-development. To my mind, in the end, at times the therapist, like any person, is alone with no armor

or defense other than personal integrity. I found myself assisted in my reading of various writings in this book by the chapters by Leonardi and Hawkins, as well as by the religious, philosophical, and person-centered thinkers to whom all of these authors refer. These essays gave me a better understanding of how different practitioners relate focusing, mindfulness, spirituality and an encounter-therapy to the person-centered approach, even though I remain a bit unclear as to the presence or absence of the intrinsic nondirective attitude of Rogerian theory in some of the essays. For me, *The Human Being Fully Alive* facilitated my empathic attitude for receiving these highly evolved and sincere practice implementations, real or attempted, of Rogers' revolutionary hypothesis.

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