

FROM PERSON TO TRANSPERSON-CENTREDNESS: A FUTURE TREND?

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The essential idea behind the Person Centred Approach (PCA) is a belief that all organisms are evolving; that given appropriate conditions they can grow to realise fuller potential. Rogers suggests that we each have a tendency, latent or realised, towards growth – a *formative tendency*. For Rogers, this formative tendency was not limited to human beings, it extended to all living forms from crystals to . . . , well, perhaps even the cosmos itself? His vision fills me with a sense of being a participant in a vast, living process of unfoldment, carrying us all God knows where. We might equally think of this tendency as an evolutionary impulse, a force that operates throughout creation to bring about some form of fulfilment – a condition of *wholeness*. It is all-pervasive, transcendent and immanent, constantly urging movement in a growth-enhancing direction.

Rogers highlights a belief

that there is one central source of energy in the human organism; that it is a trustworthy function of the whole organism rather than of some portion of it; and that it is perhaps best conceptualised as a tendency toward fulfilment, towards actualisation, not only toward the maintenance but also toward the enhancement of the organism.¹

This “actualising tendency” enables an individual to move from where they are psychologically towards a state in which they realise greater freedom from the conditioning effects of past experience. Just how it operates is a mystery. We are left to wonder whether it has its roots in the physical organism itself, whether it acts from more subtle realms of thought and feeling, or whether it is actually innate in consciousness itself.

We are faced with the questions:

What do we mean by growth in terms of the person-centred approach?
Where are we growing from?
What are we growing towards?

These are crucial questions and cause us to turn to the theoretical roots of person-centredness. The whole theory is “growth-oriented” and rests firmly on the hypothesis that all organisms have a growth potential. However this potential is distorted and blocked by how we react to our experiences and how this, in turn, shapes our self-concept. The tendency to grow, to seek our fullest potential as an effective and sensitive organism continues, but it takes us along a different

growth curve. Rogers suggests that we build up “conditions of worth,” which encourage us to establish a negative self-concept, conditioned by how others react to us. Negative conditions of worth evolve out of the put-downs of childhood and the lack of prizing from parents and significant others which most of us have experienced, or the conditional praise often given to children.

FACING UP TO OUR CONDITIONALITY

PCA seeks to enable the individual to come to terms with the conditional self and to develop in ways that free them from past conditioning. In terms of our organismic growth (or lack of growth) we find that, as we face up to our conditions of worth in a climate founded upon the core conditions, we begin to move towards the place where unconditionality might have taken us. We can never be sure of this, and it would be foolish to make dogmatic assertions in such areas of great subjectivity. The presence of the actualising tendency helps us to move towards greater wholeness. Conditionality means we take a less than direct route, and perhaps it will be a different quality of wholeness that will result. I am reminded of chaos theory and of how small initial changes can lead to large differences in outcome. Maybe it is not the form but the quality of our wholeness that matters with common elements of beauty, harmony and integrity the key. Maybe we should define wholeness less in terms of a state or condition, and more in terms of quality and presence.

Somehow, a re-integration of the feelings and thoughts associated with conditioning in an atmosphere of trust, realism and empathic understanding, enables a person to experience what Rogers termed “moments of movement.” Although these are hard to describe, they seem to be moments of deep connectedness in which a triangle of open communication is formed between the client, the therapist and some particular feeling or thought. As a therapist in that moment I feel an expansion within my being. I am reaching out, indeed, I am tempted to say I am reached out to the client, as if something more real in me is at work. All barriers are down, a kind of unity ensues. No longer blocked from an area of experience, a moment of both intra- and inter-personal communication occurs. The client is freed up to move on, no longer held back by past conditioning. Such moments play a key role in the therapeutic process of *becoming a person*. For me, they have a truly spiritual tone.

Where does this movement lead us? Rogers wrote of “the fully functioning person” – a way of being that is open to experience, that exhibits behaviour appropriate to circumstances. The individual is sensitive to his whole organism and is able to trust its promptings. It denotes a condition of integrity and of identification with one’s whole self. As Rogers wrote:

It appears that the person who is psychologically free moves in the direction of becoming a more fully functioning person.²

To be psychologically free is to be open to the reality of human experience without being limited by conditioning. It was Carl Rogers’s belief that through the application of PCA in therapy, psychological freedom could be encouraged. For me, it can be summed up as: *we grow towards a new way of being that frees us to a fuller experience and expression of our own wholeness*.

This is a very optimistic perspective and one that gives us hope. I would like to explore the nature of the potential that we can discover within us through the growth process and where the actualising tendency might lead us. Could this be into realms beyond those of accepted psychological growth? Are there greater potentials that we can discover and actualise that may appear to act out of other dimensions of being, or of aspects of our nature that might be described as spiritual? David Brazier asks:

Are we to actualize ourselves as individuals or as parts of something greater than ourselves?³

He then continues:

The spiritual implications of this question may be unsettling for many who have been at home in the person-centred approach for a long time, but they were not entirely alien to Rogers himself who conceptualized the self-actualizing tendency as simply a special case of a “greater formative tendency at work in the universe.”

SOUL-CENTRED PSYCHOLOGY

I would like, at this point, to introduce a different perspective that has been described as *Soul-centred psychology*. It acknowledges our spirituality, and the idea that we have, at the core of our psychological make-up, a Soul, a spiritual consciousness that transcends our normal awareness yet which we can access, experience and draw on. It can be thought of as embodying qualities of love and compassion, existing in a state of wholeness that in some way transcends the individualistic nature. Human beings are seen as part of an evolutionary process whose main thrust is the development and expansion of consciousness. The life process is about opening our hearts and minds to our Soul nature and allowing its essential qualities to find expression in our lives.

What force drives the growth and expansion of consciousness? *Love*? A quality of love that is rooted not in personal likes, desires and attractions but which is more of a universal force that bonds, unites and coheres. The Soul-centred perspective suggests that we are all subject to an evolutionary impulse that is driving us back to God. Each of us has within us God-like potential, a certain God-like immanence providing us with a path of approach towards the more commonly acknowledged transcending God.

I equate this God-like aspect with the Soul, the nature of which is surely love. This is by no means an idea special to any particular school of thought; it lies at the core of spiritual traditions around the world. For me, it is this crucial aspect of ourselves that holds the key to the basic trustworthiness of the human organism that Rogers emphasises. I feel uncomfortable with the word “organism” which seems too biological, carrying with it an implication that we are nothing more than a physical body. I sense that Rogers, as his life progressed, realised that the organism was more, much more, than a biological entity. The passing over of his wife, Helen, had a deep effect on him and the following passage highlights his openness to larger possibilities.

[my experiences] made me much more open to the possibility of the continuation of the individual human spirit, something I had never before believed possible. These experiences have left me very much interested in all types of paranormal phenomena. They have quite changed my understanding of the process of dying. I now consider it possible that each of us is a continuing spiritual essence lasting over time, and occasionally incarnated in a human body.⁴

A challenging statement to the whole PCA movement, particularly from someone who had previously sought to pioneer a strictly humanistic approach to psychotherapy.

Many have experienced a yearning for a deeper connection and for more meaningful relationships in which this inner, spiritual nature can be present. This union or “yoga” has been described using a variety of images, such as: the spark returning to the flame, the water droplet returning

to the ocean. In the therapeutic relationship we can create an environment that touches this longing, creating a kind of re-remembering of that which we know within us yet which we have forgotten. Something very precious can be created, that reflects a quality of being and wholeness that transcends the normal round of separative and selfish reactions in daily life. Therapy is not merely a technique for overcoming blocks and problems but offers an opportunity for growth beyond becoming a person. It offers the opportunity of Soul-centred living.

In reality we each have a good deal of experience that obstructs this kind of deeper contact. Blocks have to be faced and worked through in a way that is appropriate for each individual. There is a problem. The higher, spiritual component of the therapist has to be present in the therapeutic alliance if the client is to find stimulation and encouragement to reach into this area of his or her own being. When this is not present I would tentatively suggest that person-centredness can have a tendency to encourage self-centredness and to actually provide an obstruction to further growth. I have witnessed how the ideal of getting in touch with our own personal feelings can lead people to put these first, as if they have some paramount importance over the feelings of others. Is this not selfishness, sanctioned by therapy?

FALSE CONDITIONING

I suggest that as well as being exposed to "negative conditioning", we are also affected by *false conditioning*, in the sense of being conditioned in ways that are at odds with our inner Soul natures. Such false conditioning may appear and feel positive, for instance, to go out and be successful, to strive for more material possessions and to get to the top. All very sound and positive stuff, but is this what our spiritual natures demand of us? Where is the compassion and the loving kindness? Where are the feelings of community? Where is the sensitivity to the needs of others and to our own inner, aesthetic qualities? I think we need to widen the scope of conditions of worth and to differentiate between negative and false conditioning.

Perhaps we should dwell a little more on this distinction. Negative conditions of worth provide us with a secondary valuing system, distorting our self-concept and affecting our functioning capacity. We become unable to act freely and openly in the world. We lose our childlike wonder and openness to every new experience. False conditioning provides an overlay that emphasises competitiveness and selfishness, compounding the distortion of negative conditioning. This may then be exacerbated by Darwinian-like urges from our organism to succeed and survive in a hostile and threatening world. Is all this an inevitable facet of the growth cycle?

This, for me, is where it gets particularly challenging. To reach the spiritual component within us we have to move through a phase of getting in touch with our humanness, a humanness that has been largely shaped through the false, worldly conditioning that tells us we are separate beings in an unconnected world. To be effective in such a world, we are told, requires us to be centred in ourselves, with a dominating, separative note enabling us to hold our own power and impose ourselves on circumstances and others.

I believe that the PCA can enable people to move through negative conditions of worth and false conditioning. My concern lies in whether false conditioning is recognised as a possible block to growth and distinguished from negative conditioning. I feel sure that actualisation holds the promise of taking the individual through the barriers of false conditioning, through the stage of "separative humanness," towards that which transcends it. If we have within us a spiritual core, then the actualising tendency must move us in this direction. We should beware of setting limits through our own mind-sets as to just where the actualising tendency can take us.

Some argue that the idea of person-centredness is only applicable in the therapeutic encounter and not in the "real" world, that the two can be, maybe should be, kept separate, with the therapist applying person-centredness to an encounter in order to stimulate growth. I believe that this

perspective is rooted in a false conditioning that denies the potential to grow beyond the therapy room through the struggle of engaging with the world in a person-centred way. It also suggests a refusal to grow in such a way by the therapist. I do not believe you can throw a psychological switch to turn PCA on and off. Either it is internalised into your being as a functioning person, or it isn't.

SPIRITUALITY

Is there a higher level of humanness that transcends the therapeutic encounter and is unlimited by the false concept of separation? Have human beings the capacity to move into a different mode of engaging with the world? Once the actualising tendency is triggered it is the responsibility of the therapist to maintain a *way of being* with the client that can resonate with the client's higher potential. If this is lost sight of, the client could become locked into a self-centred stage of person-centredness.

I do not think this is good enough or, indeed, what Rogers would wish. I believe that he himself lived this journey and it was only in later years that he, too, began to break through into a more transcending realm of human interaction. Much of his work was modelled on his earlier experiences, and many of the papers that others have presented are based on Rogers' earlier ideas. I feel it represents only part of the journey. It needs to evolve further. Writing about the "community-forming process," Rogers referred to characteristics of "transcendence, or spirituality." He goes on to say, "these are words that, in earlier years, I would never have used." His language moved as a result of his experiences – no doubt, "moments of movement" – and clearly Rogers towards the end of his life was not the same man he was 50 years before. We need to be empathic to his personal journey and the meanings and values that emerged for him.

Is there a level of human being that is of a different order to the human experience of everyday living? In a reference to a paper of my own,⁵ David Brazier comments concerning group relationships:

We may even find that "at a deeper level" between us "there is a fundamental connectedness." This last assertion does seem to go beyond Carl Rogers.⁶

But does it? I do not believe "fundamental connectedness" to be beyond Carl Rogers. Experiences in later life brought Carl Rogers to evolve his own understanding of consciousness to the degree that he could write:

I find definitely appealing the views of Arthur Koestler that individual consciousness is but a fragment of a cosmic consciousness . . .⁷

I wonder if it is only when we open our hearts and minds to the possibility of connectedness, and thereby open our consciousness as well, that we may then experience it. Such an experience I would certainly define as *spiritual*.

Without a sense of spirituality, person-centredness could become a partial therapy, leading clients into themselves, yet not acknowledging the possibility of enabling them to approach their Self, their true spiritual nature that is rooted in connectedness and love. The negative self-concepts are worked on, and resolved, but with what are they replaced? Maybe the result is a fully functioning, *biological* organism? Whilst I acknowledge that is an achievement in itself, I suggest we merely create a mechanism, a personality, through which something far more profound is awaiting to find expression.

Can the client, on experiencing acceptance and warmth towards this new, self-centred, self-affirming self-concept, confront their achievement as a possible false conditioning and so journey on to discover something deeper? The spiritual aspect has not received enough attention within the person-centred world and it needs addressing if PCA is to remain a vital force in the human potential movement. If to be person-centred is to be open to experience and possibilities then should there not be more openness to a deeper connectedness, that is more rooted in our spiritual natures? Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming no more than fully-functioning biological organisms. The fully functioning person is surely more than this?

Rogers wrote in 1961 that as the individual "moves towards being open to all his experience" he "will be more balanced and realistic, behaviour which is appropriate to the survival and enhancement of a highly social animal."⁸ This sounds extremely biological to me. But by 1980 he was writing:

Our experiences in therapy and in groups, it is clear, involves the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I, like many others, have underestimated the importance of this mystical, spiritual dimension.⁹

There must have been a movement, an expansion to embrace other possibilities during those 20 years. Clearly he now recognised the need to explore the spiritual component of human experience. He was not alone among pioneering psychologists who pointed the way forward in this direction. Jung suggested that:

We moderns are faced with the necessity of rediscovering the life of the spirit; we must experience it anew for ourselves. It is the only way in which we can break the spell that binds us to the cycle of biological events.¹⁰

Roberto Assagioli, founder of Psychosynthesis, wrote:

[Human beings] can have the intuitive realisation of [their] essential identity with the supreme Reality. In the East it has been expressed as the identity between the Atman and the Brahman. In the West some mystics have boldly proclaimed the identity between [humankind] and God. Others have emphasised that life is One, that there is only one Life. But this does not mean that [our] minds can grasp the wonder and mysteries of the cosmic manifestation. Only through a series of expansions of consciousness, only by reaching ever higher states of awareness, may [we] gradually experience some of these wondrous mysteries.

Of such transpersonal possibilities the most enlightened men and women of all ages have given testimony, expressing them in basically the same way, above the differences and colourings due to individual and cultural conditionings.¹¹

I would therefore suggest the need for a change in mind-set towards PCA, a need to build upon what we already have, by acknowledging that beyond person-centredness is something that might be called "transperson-centredness." It is a rather awkward description with too many syllables, yet I think it captures where the vision needs to be more strongly directed. It requires us to open our hearts and minds to greater possibilities and potentialities, to face a challenge that has been succinctly described by David Spangler as one in which people need to discover ways

... to utilise the energies of [their] life, of [their] consciousness, in such a way that [their] divine identity is revealed and [their] personality identity becomes illuminated within that revelation and ceases to be a disunified element operating on its own.¹²

THE CORE CONDITIONS – THE THREE IN ONE

I would like to return to the core conditions which, for me, each reflect a different quality of love, and to suggest that they resonate with the triune nature of spirit. To be real with someone (congruent) is to express a loving *will*, a will to be true to ourselves and to that person; to feel unconditional positive regard towards someone is to express a loving heart, a love that acknowledges another person's own capacity for love at the core of their being; to strive for a truly empathic understanding of another person is an expression of a loving *mind*, stemming from an intimate knowing of the client's world.

God is said to be triune in expression: spiritual will, spiritual love and spiritual mind; Father, Son and Holy Ghost; Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma. We have here a fundamental triplicity of creation. They form a triangle, a most ancient and significant symbol. Spiritual tradition speaks of the three in one, that the three can be synthesised into a unity that includes the three yet which is more; in effect it is greater than the sum of its parts. This unity is perhaps some greater quality of Love operating out of a deeper dimension. Can we find a parallel with the core conditions? I would suggest that we can, that the three core conditions are, in some mysterious way, contained in the one which Rogers calls *quality of presence*.

Such presence proceeds from a sense of unity between client and counsellor, from a condition of love that transcends personal desire and reaction. It is borne out of a wholeness: separation ceases to operate; negative and false conditions of worth cease to exist in the moment. A glimpse of a fuller Reality is gained that stirs hidden memories. Neither client nor therapist can ever be quite the same again. A moment of real movement takes place.

Rogers wrote of how when he was closest to his inner, intuitive self, to the unknown in himself, and perhaps "in a slightly altered state of consciousness," then whatever he did seemed "to be full of healing."

Then, simply my presence is releasing and helpful to the other. There is nothing I can do to force this experience, but when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways which I cannot justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my thought processes. But these strange behaviours turn out to be right, in some odd way: it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present.¹³

This does not mean that a poor self-concept disappears for good, but its disappearance in the moment offers an opportunity to experience a deeper, less self-centred, transpersonal way of being. How might we describe such experiences? They are beyond words: only silence seems to be appropriate. Such moments are rooted in a quality of Knowing, Loving and Being that is more God-like than human. It is important to emphasise that such experiences, if they are to have relevance to human evolution, must work out through the person. This has been highlighted by one of the forerunners in the use of the term, "transpersonal" – Dane Rudhyar:

I have spoken of the "transpersonal way"; but in using the term, transpersonal, I am referring to an activity that is focused through the person, not merely to a reaching out beyond or above the personality.¹⁴

IN CONCLUSION

We are struggling within a world of conditioned experience and identity to discover who or what we truly are, to break free of the self-concepts, the negative and false conditioning that bind us to a world of separateness. It is a world that, according to Rogers, is pervaded by a formative tendency and our goal is to allow ourselves to participate fully and consciously in the formative process. Can we trigger the actualising tendency of Rogers? Can we find ways to co-operate with the all-encompassing evolutionary impulse, the formative tendency – the urge to grow in consciousness? Can we tread a path through life that will lead us from darkness to light; from the unreal world of negative and false conditioning to the Real world that in some way proceeds out of our spiritual core; from the death of conditioned existence to the immortality of Soul-centred personhood?

A new evolutionary level of human consciousness is even now seeking to find in men, [women] and groups everywhere focal points for manifestation; and at that level their keynote is love – agape, the love of the companions through whom [Humanity] may find agents for synthesis and for the harmonisation of [humankind's] myriads of potentialities through co-operative action . . . now is the time for mutation. It is a basic mutation, just as fundamental as that which led tribal man to form civilisations, where minds and individuals learned to think, to question, to gain personal independence, to assert their ego-will and yearn for personal power and lustful excitement.¹⁵

We are left to ponder what it is that we essentially are. In our present time, more and more people seem to be searching for greater meaning in their lives, having found their life-experience barren or simply too painful to bear. Why do so many people today turn to therapy, join self-awareness groups, meditate or generally involve themselves in the human potential movement? There is a growing belief in a reality that in some way transcends and, by its very nature, gives meaning to our experience of life in this world. What is going on? What is it they seek? And what happens when they find it and know it, and realise that it is simply and truly themselves, rooted in a common core of divinity that had been lost sight of? What happens when the divine is actualised in people? Could it be that they will experience fresh motivation to bring qualities of love and compassion into the world? Might they become more responsive and responsible individuals towards human and world need? I would suggest that somewhere in this experience comes a realisation of what it is to be truly *transperson-centred*.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Carl Rogers, *Carl Rogers on Personal Power*, London, Constable and Co. Ltd., 1978. pp. 242-3.
- ² *The Carl Rogers Reader*, edited by Kirschenbaum and Henderson, London, Constable and Co. Ltd, 1990. p. 419.
- ³ David Brazier, "Beyond Carl Rogers," *Person-Centred Practice*, Vol. 2 No. 1, Summer 1994, pp. 7-8.
- ⁴ Carl Rogers, *A Way of Being*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980. pp. 91-2.
- ⁵ Richard Bryant-Jefferies, "A personal exploration of person-centredness," *Person Centred Practice* Vol. 1, Part 1, Summer 1993, pp. 19-24.
- ⁶ David Brazier, Beyond Carl Rogers, *Person-Centred Practice*, Vol. 2 No. 1, Summer 1994, pp. 5-10
- ⁷ Carl Rogers, *A Way of Being*, p. 88.
- ⁸ *The Carl Rogers Reader*, edited by Kirschenbaum and Henderson, p. 419.
- ⁹ Carl Rogers, *A Way of Being*, p. 30.
- ¹⁰ Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1961. p. 122.
- ¹¹ Roberto Assagioli, *Act of Will*, England, Cracible, 1990. pp. 125-6.

¹² David Spangler, *Relationship and Identity*, Scotland, Findhorn Press Ltd., 1978. pp. 50-1

¹³ Carl Rogers, *A Way of Being*, p. 129.

¹⁴ Dane Rudhyar, *Directions for New Life*, quoted in *Twelve Seats at the Round Table*, by Edward Matchett and Sir George Trevelyan, Jersey, Neville Spearman (Jersey) Ltd., (1976). p.15.

¹⁵ Dane Rudhyar, *Directions for New Life*, quoted in *Twelve Seats at the Round Table*, by Edward Matchett and Sir George Trevelyan. pp. 15-6.

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