

THE ORIGINAL CONDITIONS: A CLIENT'S PERSPECTIVE OF THERAPY

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Introduction

One cannot help another heal from a snakebite by subjecting them to yet another snakebite. This approach would clearly seem counter-intuitive. Yet, although injury is certainly not any therapist's deliberate intent, sometimes what the client experiences in therapy is precisely another snakebite. If the snakebites suffered by children can be seen by a therapist then the client's re-experiencing of them might be avoided. Although I am not a therapist, I have been a client. It is from this experience that I offer this perspective.

Empathic understanding allows clients to contact the inner knowing of their childhood wisdom. The person-centered approach (PCA) can be viewed as offering an alternative therapeutic approach for those people, including me, who were "successfully" thrown off their track by developmentally inappropriate attitudes and conditions propagated by mainstream culture. The PCA can be observed as facilitating an individual's shift back to the natural way of being that was denied him rather than as a method of "curing" the harm that was done. Although I have not experienced person-centered therapy as a client, its emphasis on empathic understanding, in particular, can be understood as restorative to the child thrown-off in her raising. Because one's inner wisdom becomes hidden in the absence of the necessary attitudes and conditions, it can be discovered when those conditions are provided.

Examining our primary cultural rearing institutions-- our public schools-- reveals the presence of attitudes and conditions that have derailed so many individuals. In the present paper, a brief critique of public school practices will show that person-centered and humanistic education can be helpful in responding to those all-too-common attitudes and conditions that disturb a child's natural developmental processes. A strong resonance between person-centered theory and practice and holistic child development theories and practice reveals that the synthesis of these two fields of study is nothing more nor less than the "freeing of the child." The self-actualizing tendency can be understood as taking place within this context.

The Snakebite

The harm caused by common educational practices within our schools is, in my opinion, not irreparable. I propose that the origins of the snakebites reside in our educators holding up personally meaningless standards (Rogers, 1969, p.5); evaluating students based on meeting these standards; and evaluating students on their ability to meet these standards within the system's time frame. This approach is psychologically and spiritually deleterious to the child and to society. John Taylor Gatto, former New York city and state teacher of the year and outspoken critic of our public schools describes these largely unacknowledged deleterious effects. He writes, "In school, a washing away of the innate power of the individual mind takes place, a cleansing so comprehensive and thorough that original thinking becomes difficult" (Gatto, 2001, p. 61).

Gatto suggests that one can only assume that those who created the system intended these effects to be best. He continues:

If you don't believe this development was part of the intentional design of schooling, you should read William Torrey Harris' *The Philosophy of Education*. Harris was the US Commissioner of Education at the turn of the century and the man most influential in standardizing our schools.... 'Ninety-nine [students] out of a hundred,' writes Harris, 'are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow the prescribed custom.' This is not an accident, Harris explains, but the 'result of substantial education, which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual.' (Gatto, 2001, p. 61)

If one understands "original thinking" to be the expression of one's own inner knowing based on one's own inner experiencing of both the subjective and objective worlds, then what Gatto seems to be saying is that schools "wash away" the child's attempt to get in touch with his own knowing and experience, making original experiencing, and so original thinking difficult. To me, this washing away is the original snakebite. For those of us who faced similar well-intended circumstances in the home, the effect of this washing away can be quite profound. As John Holt, pioneering author of the classic, *How Children Fail*, writes:

But there is a more important sense in which almost all children fail: Except for a handful who may or may not be good students, they fail to develop more than a tiny part of the tremendous capacity for learning, understanding, and creating with which they were born...(Holt, 1982, p. 5)

School, in essence, teaches us to keep ourselves from ourselves, to become strangers to ourselves and to disconnect from everything that we know. When one understands this effect, I believe one understands that the work of therapy is to facilitate the process of reconnecting to ourselves. It is to provide for the client the conditions that will allow her to reconnect with her natural intelligence. In contrast to the views of some, I do not believe that full and entire reconnection cannot be accomplished. When one has truly understood the process that leads to the washing away, one understands that full reconnection is possible through the provision of genuinely facilitative conditions. It is merely a matter of getting back into the original flow of one's life.

The Work of the Therapist

In describing the extraordinary gains made by a student with whom he had been working, Holt (1982) recognizes the significance of the snakebite, and implies the work of the therapist. He writes:

There is no use in we teachers telling ourselves that such children *ought* to know more, *ought* to understand better, *ought* to be able to work more efficiently; the facts are what count. The reason this poor child has learned hardly anything in six years of school is that no one ever began where she *was*; just as the reason she was able to make such extraordinary gains in efficiency and understanding during this session is that, beginning where she was, she was learning genuinely and on her own. (Holt, 1982, p. 205)

Just as the task of the teacher is to begin where the student is, so the task of the therapist is to begin where the client is. It is because no one in the client's life has ever begun where she is, including teachers and parents, that the client enters therapy. When the conditions arise that allow her to begin where she is, the process of therapy begins. Rogers (1989) describes his own awakening to this tenet of a helping relationship in his book, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. After failing to help a woman see the nature of the problem with her son as stemming from her early rejection of him, the woman asks if Rogers ever sees adults in therapy. When Rogers says yes, she spills out her story, which Rogers notes marked the beginning of successful therapy. He writes in retrospect:

This incident was one of a number which helped me to experience the fact...that it is the *client* who knows what hurts, what directions to go, what problems are crucial, what experiences have been deeply buried. It began to occur to me that...I would do better to rely upon the client for the direction of movement in the process. (Rogers, 1989a, pp. 11-12)

To facilitate this vital learning, or this journey back to the point of one's own genuine knowing and becoming, Rogers explains that he seeks to

create a relationship with [the client] in which he is safe and free...to understand the way he feels in his own world, to accept him as he is, to create an atmosphere of freedom in which he can move in his thinking and feeling and being in any direction he desires. (Rogers, 1989b, pp. 108-109)

Holt describes it somewhat differently. Concerning the teacher's job in the classroom he observes that

[t]he teacher first of all tries to prepare a space - a physical, intellectual, and emotional space - in which the students will have a good chance of leading a fairly interesting life. *Then* the teacher's big job is to see what the students do in that space. (Holt, 1982, p. 35)

In other words, the teacher's job, or the parent's job, is to provide an atmosphere of freedom that allows the student to lead. When the teacher, parent, or both, fail, the client may eventually enter therapy. It then is vital for the therapist to provide the conditions that are essential for learning and growth to occur. Rather than repeating the original snakebite by attempting, as Rogers did in the above example, to lead the client to an understanding of his problem (which is not the problem), the therapist instead endeavors to provide for the client the original conditions-- to begin where he is. In this way the client may tap into what Holt (1982) describes as the tremendous inborn capacities of individuals for learning, understanding, and creating; so that they may learn genuinely, and on their own.

As Elizabeth Freire and Newton Tambara (2001, pp. 129-130) write: "The only aim of client-centered therapy is to promote the release of the client's actualizing tendency." With this understanding in mind, it may prove useful for the therapist to consider the following holistic theory of child growth and development.

A Person-Centered Compatible Theory of Child Development

In their book, *Natural Learning Rhythms: Discovering How and When Your Child Learns* (1993), Josette and Sambhava Luvmour offer a theory of child development that helps to explain the results of person-centered therapy from a developmental perspective. Below is a summary of this theory, drawn primarily from the Luvmour's introductory material in their chapter, "The Life Stages."

Four Life Stages And Approximate Ages	Four Wisdoms that Animate Beings and Govern the Nature of Learning	Primary Method for Engaging the World
1. Body-Being (0-7)	Body Wisdom	Sensation
2. Emotional-Being (8-12)	Emotion Wisdom	Feelings
3. Will-Being (13-15)	Will Wisdom	Assertion and Challenge
4. Reasoning-Being (16-22)	Reasoning Wisdom	Thinking

What is most significant for the present discussion is the Luvmour's proposal that the presence of a unique cluster of attitudes and conditions allow a child to make successful contact with the wisdom of any particular stage. Although each wisdom is innate, the attitudes and conditions present in the child's life will determine the degree of success or failure she experiences in making contact with her self.

All four of the Luvmour's life stages are divided into three phases, including 1) receptivity; 2) trial and error; and 3) competency. Concerning the phase of receptivity, the Luvmours say:

The child...exhibits a great deal of vulnerability. He has just gone through the birth of the newest life stage, and so he must perceive the world in a brand new way. This newness is both awesome and compelling, and the child needs all the support he can get. He is wide open and ready to learn, absorbing all the information he can. (Luvmour, 1993, p. 14)

As the child enters the trial and error phase:

[h]e will experiment with a new kind of behavior...stringing words together into cohesive sentences in Body-Being, or making personal commitments in Reasoning-Being. And he'll do this in as many different settings as he can, as long as he needs to, until he feels that he understands its particular power and meaning. (p. 14)

Finally, the child enters the competency phase:

This is the full-blown expression of the life stage he is currently in, and he directly experiences himself as body, emotional, will, or reasoning wisdom. At the climax of this phase... the child prepares to travel into the next life stage. (pp. 14-15)

Marking this preparation is what the Luvmours call the "hesitancy." Hesitancy refers to "a lull, a coalescing of energy and information to make the quantum leap" (p. 13). Hesitancy is considered essential to the growth process of the human child and will manifest as a slowing down in progress, and at times as a regression (p.13). If understood and well facilitated, the child will move-- wisdom intact-- to the next phase or stage. However,

treated in a hostile way (like an illness, for example), and...blocked, the stage-specific wisdom must come to the child's rescue and 'insist' that the hesitancy occur. If the scene turns into a battle, the child learns that change and conflict are inseparable. She learns that taking the time to check her support systems, a natural and wise response, is not condoned. Worse, she exhausts herself trying to both please her disapproving parents, and to honor her innate wisdom. (p. 13)

Personal Experiences in Therapy

I would like now to present three situations from my own experience as a client to illustrate the use of the Luvmours' theory of natural learning rhythms of the child in making sense of otherwise confusing situations. The first involves a time when I made what I'd felt to be a desperate effort to reconnect with an old friend; and my subsequent feelings of insecurity about the connection. I thought it odd that I had made this effort to reconnect, because I felt it could prove neither satisfying nor fruitful for me at that time in my life. It was more like going recklessly for an old habit to soothe the unbearable sense of loneliness and inadequacy I felt at the time.

When I brought this confusing situation up in therapy, the therapist responded enthusiastically to my mentioning that I'd made contact with an old friend. It seemed to me that she believed this effort to be a positive sign of growth on my part, regardless of my

confused and ambivalent feelings about it. When I demurred, I was thankful that she made a genuine effort to listen. But as I talked, I felt that she was listening in a different way than I was speaking. It is difficult to explain, but there was a gravity to her presence as I explained my feelings that something seemed wrong to me. I found her felt presence to be hampering, although I was able to make some progress in exploring this situation. Eventually I talked about co-dependence. Although I cannot say so with certainty, I believe that what I was experiencing at that time in therapy was the filtering of what I was saying through her understanding rather than mine.

Another example involves a time when I was struggling with my sense of connection to the gay and lesbian community. Over the last decade, things have changed dramatically in the gay and lesbian community. I observed this change at a local annual Gay Pride festival. Almost overnight the festival seemed to me to change from a small gathering with an intimate feel to a mob-infested commercial enterprise. The gay community was now "in," and mainstream values were prominent. Because I am not at home with mainstream values, this change felt alienating to me, and I wrestled each year with the decision of whether or not to attend. On the one hand, it was the only time of year one could experience the world as "gay," and enjoy an unaccustomed sense of belonging. On the other hand, the "gay" world no longer seemed to resonate with who I was.

As I talked through this conflict, I sensed that it caused some discomfort for the therapist, and at times I felt my perspective directly challenged. On one level, I do not mind having my perspective challenged; however, on another level, the approach served to frustrate my efforts to understand my own feelings. At any rate, after not having gone to Gay Pride the previous year, I decided, somewhat ambivalently, to go.

At the end of the last therapy session prior to Pride, in which I had communicated my decision, the therapist made a good-humored comment that maybe I might "meet someone." My reaction was one of overwhelm and fear. I felt nowhere near a place of considering dating or partnership. In fact, I was not sure sexual relationship was the direction I wanted to go in my life. After a gulp and a pause, I managed to say, good-naturedly enough, though in seriousness, that that was not why I was going.

The final example I want to offer involves efforts on my part to take a break from therapy. I had been working intensely, coming in more frequently than usual. Because to come in so frequently was a financial burden on me, and because I did not like the idea of carrying a balance, when I reached a resting point, I wanted to give myself a financial reprieve, calling as I needed to schedule appointments every few weeks or so rather than having a set schedule. I also had the sense that I needed to make way for the "next thing," whatever that might be. It made sense to me that I required a reprieve from the emotional as well as the financial intensity I'd just come through.

When I brought this plan up in therapy, it was met with resistance. I believe that the therapist believed that money might be a red herring for other issues that might be present, and that she felt concern about this possibility. I believe she determined that the apparent suddenness of the change indicated this possibility. Knowing the therapist genuinely cared about me and having worked with her for some time, I was willing to consider this perspective. But I believe that it did not reflect the real situation. Rather than avoiding an issue, I felt that in fact I was entering into my actualizing potential. While I felt heartbroken

that my journey seemed to be taking me away from someone who'd been such a positive influence in my life and with whom I felt a strong connection, there was nevertheless something else I had to do. It wasn't a matter of choice, but of necessity. Nevertheless, I did not necessarily see this something else as an end to therapy at that time, merely a change.

In hindsight, I believe I had reached what the Luvmours call the *saturation point*. I believe the work I was doing in therapy was the work of contacting and anchoring the wisdom of Emotional-Being, and that the next step was entering into the trial and error phase of this stage. Unfortunately, this movement necessitated that I focus my emotional and financial resources in a different direction. To better understand, I believe it is best to take a closer look at Emotional-Being.

A Closer Look at Emotional-Being

"Emotional-Being," write the Luvmours, "is loathe to turn the child away from her family and community, but in the face of extremely hypocritical models, it will do even that" (Luvmour, 1993, p. 45). In looking at the first two situations described above, one can see all the elements of Emotional-Being. There is my struggle with the gay and lesbian community. There is my compulsion to reconnect, in my opinion ill-advisedly at that time in my life, with my old network of friends, which I initiated by calling one of those friends. Although not provided by example, there was also at that time in my life an intense inner struggle concerning my relationship with my family. Further was the strong reaction I had to the comment that I might "meet someone" (a premature expectation for the person in Emotional-Being, and so understandably frightening). In the last example, one can see the presence of Emotional-Being in a different way. I had reached a saturation point. I felt I was entering into the lull, or hesitancy that follows a stage or phase. This explanation also accounts for the suddenness of my shift in focus.

What a Therapist Might Do

I consider the natural learning rhythms perspective to be highly compatible with a person-centered way of understanding. Therapists who understand natural rhythms can help clients to locate subtler layers of their individual process; and so provide them with greater clarity into their own natural wisdom. With greater clarity, the therapist may be more successful in her efforts to empathically understand the client, increasing the chances of providing for the client the essential, original conditions needed for growth. Person-centered therapists are concerned with providing conditions necessary for growth. I offer the following suggestions for adult therapy as an integration of the person-centered empathic approach vis-à-vis the perspective of the natural learning rhythms of the child.

Recognizing signs of Emotional-Being's emergence in therapy, including a client's vulnerability in this phase of growth, can heighten a therapist's empathic response. She may recognize, for example, that hypocrisy is of great concern to the client (Luvmour & Luvmour, 1993, p. 44). Non-judgmental and non-directive sensitivity to the importance of exploring issues of hypocrisy may enhance her capacity for accurate empathy. Not being hypocritical herself (i.e., being genuinely who she is, which is something that was always true of my therapist and proved to be enormously therapeutic for me), she can provide a vital role model for Emotional-Being, which is required for her health (Luvmour, p. 45). She may recognize

the key role feelings play for the client in her relationships during Emotional-Being's reign, as well as her lack of experience with these feelings (Luvmour, p. 44), and endeavor to non-judgmentally understand the feelings the client is experiencing concerning her relationships. She may further recognize matters that do not concern Emotional-Being, such as sexual relationship, and so not introduce them. In these ways, the therapist might assist the client in Emotional-Being as she endeavors to contact her innate emotional wisdom. Acquainted with the other wisdoms, the therapist will be equally prepared to assist the client in making contact with these wisdoms also.

Final Thoughts

Many client's define their purpose for entering therapy to be that of making some kind of sense of their past as it is experienced in them in the present, as pain, confusion, suffering, and so forth. The person-centered therapist believes that the way to help is to provide the conditions necessary for growth. I agree. I have endeavored to show the potential relevance of the natural learning rhythms of the child in the work of person-centered therapy with the adult. Understanding natural rhythms and their disturbances can sensitize the therapist to perceiving subtler and more humanistically oriented developmental tasks than are considered by other developmental theories. An understanding of life stage and life phase processes and injuries (from a natural rhythms perspective) can orient the PCA therapist toward providing more relevant original conditions. Acceptance and understanding can be more complete if relevant to each stage.

Taken together, the PCA and natural learning rhythms perspectives could, in time, alter our whole way of perceiving individual process and so of relating to the individual. Rather than exerting pressure to achieve conformity, which is our custom today, we could instead meet the individual where she is, according to her own developmental needs. Such an approach offers the possibility of revolutionizing our educational and rearing practices, rendering therapy as it is needed today-- for the purposes of helping the client reconnect with her lost self-- obsolete. Instead, therapy would exist for the purpose of helping the client as she struggles with the now, according to her own understanding.

Finally, natural learning rhythms may be fully entered into at any time given the presence of sufficient conditions. In this regard, one can see that person-centered therapists efforts to "promote the release of the...actualizing tendency" can be thought of as the work of facilitating the client's reconnection with her own innate child wisdoms. Understanding this connection, one begins to perceive an anatomy to the self-actualizing tendency as consisting of Beings and their associated wisdoms arising in the person throughout his life. This perception, in turn, provides the person-centered therapist with opportunities to respond in more empathic ways, leading to possibilities for a greater healing presence and for clients to experience greater levels of inborn freedom and wisdom.

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