

THE USE OF POEMS OF THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Writing psychological papers in prose is very arduous and stressful for me, including the process of this introduction. Somewhat over twenty years ago, I found that I could escape my painful controls and express myself by writing my essays in loose poetic form. It took me a long time to call them poems or poetry, but I shared them with friends as communication that was freeing and sometimes successful in conveying ideas. Some early encouragement was forthcoming about the relationship of the poetry to the person-centered approach.

On the occasion of Carl Rogers's seventy-fifth birthday, Nat Raskin asked me to chair one of the symposia to honor Carl at the meetings of the American Psychological Association, a symposium in which Natalie Rogers was a participant. When Carl was offered his choice of symposia on which to be a discussant, it was not surprising that he picked his daughter's. I became determined to provide an opportunity for it to be a person-centered experience for all involved, which I thought would be the ultimate honor to Carl. I asked the presenters to send me their papers in advance for me to distribute so we might begin the process of becoming a group. I also asked everyone to meet together the day before the program to further the process and to explore how we could facilitate our group and include the audience in our process. The day before the program, therefore, we were all seated in the living room of Natalie's houseboat in Sausalito, further facilitated, or mellowed, by the gentle waves of the harbor. I had yet contributed nothing of my person beyond my administration, so I offered a poem for that purpose at our meeting. Carl burst out with, "That's it!" and asked me to start the symposium by reading the poem as a way to initiate a person-centered atmosphere.

In the meanwhile, the location for the symposium had been changed from the small room of the otherwise similar symposia to the grand ballroom. The symposium began the next day with the ballroom overflowing with two thousand participants and many more in the halls listening over the PA system.

I nervously opened the meeting with my poem, entitled "Identity." The symposium was reported in *Time* magazine whose writer was very impressed by the crowd of participants and the enthusiasm of two thousand voices singing "Happy Birthday" to Carl. It was joyful. I felt greatly encouraged by Carl and the later feedback for my poems from other person-centered psychotherapists.

The encouragement about my poems is one root of this paper. Another is that Gerald Bauman, Nat Raskin, and I had long been exploring our special interest in the person of the psychotherapist. We had begun, in 1979, to offer workshops about it at the Humanistic and the Person-Centered meetings, here and abroad. From these came the questions about how much of the inner person of the therapist might be constructively exposed and shared and in what form. Could it be facilitative and not intrusive or controlling? At the most recent of our presentations, at the Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach in Chicago in 1994, I was surprised to see how touched the participants were by my poem, "The Person in the Psychotherapist" and to have Jerold Bozarth's request to include it in the next issue of our journal.

At the same time, a dear friend of mine, an artist in another city, asked me to recommend a therapist for him, and he also asked to read my poems. He had been in therapy several months before I got the poems to him, and when that happened, he appeared to explode with relaxation. "Now I understand this therapy business! I know it's been very helpful, but I've been so confused and puzzled about it. Your poems are very helpful! You should make your poems available to everyone who comes to see you!"

I began to experiment with offering my poems, one at a time, to people who came to see me when I thought the poems were relevant to the issues at hand and when I felt secure with the person involved. Most people reported that the poems were very helpful in stimulating and encouraging their own inner exploration; others seemed quite capable and comfortable in politely ignoring them. I like to think that the poetic form is facilitating of their own control – in their considering the poems, and facilitating of their own control – in their rejecting them.

One poem, "Community," was written in direct response to a person and for that person. I realized quickly in the writing, however, that it certainly applies to me and to most of the people who come to see me. This poem is reported to be on many walls and refrigerators.

My wife, Grace, and I signed me up to share the experiment at the Sixth International Forum of the Person-Centered Approach in Greece in July of 1995. That felt so exciting and challenging that I flew down to the earlier Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach meeting in Tampa in May for a dress rehearsal. The notes I put together on the airplane for an introduction became a poem. There was lots of encouragement. The most surprising, however, was that after I had chosen only poems that were obviously related to therapy, my friends insisted that some of my strictly personal poems should be included. I asked the group to help me decide. They asked for those poems and then said that those strictly personal ones were the struggles of everyone in self exploration, seeming to echo Carl's words, "The most personal is the most universal." They also commented, "Your poems are so much you, Armin!," seeming to foreshadow the next encounter in Greece.

The presentation in Greece was a further enrichment. My poems seemed to facilitate the group process, so it wasn't surprising that the people thought the poems might facilitate other searchers. There were several poets in the group and the meeting seemed to go far beyond the Tampa meeting. It developed into a substantive, searching exploration of congruence. The climax still reverberates within me. I still feel stunned and challenged in depths beyond my understanding. Irene Barberopoulos, a published poet in Greece, quietly stated with simple dignity, "I think that poetry is the deepest congruence."

That was a very powerful experience for me. I wonder if my sharing my poetry can be part of expressing my congruence. I wonder. When I feel trusting of me and of the person who has come to see me and of our momentary process, I wonder if my sharing a poem can be expressing my unconditional positive regard and be deeply empathic.

POEMS OF THE PERSON OF THIS PSYCHOTHERAPIST

Persons come to me wishing to learn more about themselves.

They learn to get in touch with the natural way

They have always been learning about themselves.

They learn they can be trusting of that process.

They learn they can facilitate it themselves.

I am very deeply moved by their wishes.

I am deeply touched by the uniqueness of

Each person's process.

I feel my powerful wish to be facilitative of their process.

To me, that means to be as much a real person as I can be
While staying within that beautiful, magical framework of
My wish for their own process.

Some kinds of sharing feel strongly counter-facilitating,
Discouraging of each person's individual self-exploration;
Thinking about, advice, interpretation, authority.
Indeed, I feel not real within the framework of
Facilitating their process when I notice such impulses in me.

I am experimenting, however, with sharing poems of my person
With other persons who are exploring their own inner worlds.
My poems are about exploration of self and
Exploration of the nature of facilitation.

I experience, or, perhaps, imagine
My sharing my poems as facilitating.
I would like some company in exploring this.
I wonder what your feeling responses are to this issue,
And to my poetry.
I wonder what you might like to share with me.

May 26, 1995

IDENTITY

I am a constantly changing person,
Neither man nor woman.
They don't change, for they are
identities, tangible, controls.
I have no identity, no sameness
With anything. Even over time.
In each moment from each other,
I am a different world.

I am a constantly *imagined* identity.
A man, and a woman.
For I want names for my feelings,
Names for my moments.
I want to stand a scarecrow
Over my endlessly quivering,
Flowing fields of wheat – not to scare
The crows, but to face the other
Imagined identities. I want some control!

I am afraid of change!
I do not know my next feeling!

1976,95

THE PERSON IN THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST

Self-respect is a sin!

In the country where I lived my youth.

Even now, I fear it is a sin against my ancient childhood Gods

To be interested in myself.

To think of crossing the oceans that surround

My conscious neighborhood,

Voyage across a stormy, frightening sea

To loosen my ways of thinking,

To enter other lands of my feelings; strange, terrifying,

Joyful, and always mysteriously familiar.

But I cast my mooring lines ashore long ago,

When I chose my profession, my art.

Now reality appears changed.

(What would the changes have been with other choices?)

This new reality feels so unstable, such a fearful exploration –

And so exciting! So unknown, yet so reminiscent of

My earliest childhood, before I marked out those bounds of

My conscious neighborhood.

So, is it not even a greater sin, hubris against the Gods,

To invite other mortal humans on board, to offer even

To *be* the vessel that loosens their thinking ways and

Enables them to cross *their* violent seas?

And then to offer a supporting companionship if they wish

To land on their unexplored reaches of feelings?

Their ancient forbidding Gods are so like mine.

I must admit it *is* a sin of self-respect

Against those worshipped virtues,

Those external authorities and protecting powers

Who give a fantasied meaning and order

To my all-too chaotic existence.

Surely, it is true that I am frightened

When I stay open and explorative, when I choose to ignore

My categories and judgements.

But I remember my youthful excitement, as I read of the

Renaissance explorers bursting out to medieval piety

And the limited world of obedience to supernatural powers,

Crossing forbidden seas of mind and space,

Claiming the world for mortal humans.

I remember my vicarious thrill as stout Cortez

Stepped off his ship, encased in cuirass. How he must have

Shook - to want that rigid armor! My thrill as he

Pointed his harquebus at strange, yet familiar other-humans.

Those explorers insisted on armor, guns, and

Imposing their way of life. Yet, *they were there!*
Risking the mix of their selves with new spirits
And new visions. With new friends – and change!

How much more thrill it is now to *be* the vessel that helps
Explorers cross their stormy seas, opening their thinking,
For me to be a companion in their scary and treasure-filled
New world. A companion that knows not the explorers'
New worlds, but only my own, the joys of exploring, and
The fears of my own discoveries.

But, indeed, I still lean on my ancient Gods.
They help me with my old neighbors.
And my explorers bring their own ancient Gods on board.
Their Gods and mine are such good friends,
That I quake and struggle on our journey.
Especially, when my explorer friends stumble, and –
Homesick – vanish, or panicked – close their armor and
Point their guns at *me*, saying that I am bad company
Or a bad new land, myself, for them.
They think they must destroy me for their own safety.
I feel so scared, responsible, and sad to lose their company,
That I forget that our conflicts and my losses
Are not really ancient Gods, But are yet more meetings for me
With new humans, new visions, and new places in
My own new world.

1981,95

COMMUNITY

I like that social reformer who said,
"Love thy neighbor as thy self."
"As thy self" seems to be
An equality of love
For both of us.
It means to me that
I must love my self
As I love my neighbor.
Oh, how wonderful that feels!
If I could *do it*, we could have
Sharing — company — and community.

1994

DEATH IN LIFE

Let me die.
Let me own my own death.
I have a darker side, my discouragement,
My stopping, my saying all is down.

Me and you, loved ones.
To say it is a kind of release,
A kind of letting go of control; and to not feel controlled
By your liveliness, either.

So, let us not make Satanic compacts
To merge in witchcraft,
Pretend to merge into one another
In clever unloneliness – but Self-less darkness.

There is no life in life
Without death in life.
But death in life is a lonely, private affair.
Have yours, and I'll have mine.

Let's not interfere – with help.
Or how else can you feel free
To negate us,
And I feel free
To negate us,
So that we can experience our choice
To give us birth
And
To watch us grow?

1975,95

BLAME

I want to enjoy my being powerless
In the world of feelings.
Tho I do seem to enjoy, also, the power
To confuse and blind you and me.
(I do love a merry dance with you.)
For
I know I really flow, and we flow,
Uncontrolled; love and hate, joy and pain.
(A different, beautiful, open dance)
As I look for more and more of me and you
In this world of all of our feelings.
Yes,
It is true that I play with ideas and morality
Surely as much to hide as to find my tugging self.
It's fun to think, and, oh, so much fun to blame.
But when my thinking
"thinks" an illusion of cause,
And my thinking
"thinks" an illusion of blame;
Together, they dance without fun

An illusion of power such as to leave me reeling.
Saying,
"Yes, I can stop our flow!
I can do it . . . I did it!
Not only can I think and blame in fun,
I can believe me! I can believe my blame.
I can believe that I can control our feelings."
Yes,
I would rather face and want to enjoy
My being powerless
In the world of feelings.

1976,95

WHEN HAPPINESS DISAPPEARS

The more I feel my loving feelings,
The happier I feel.
The more I feel my loving feelings,
The more open I feel;
Alive and connected to those I love,
Yet, So joyfully fearful, vulnerable.

What is this fear I feel so deeply
In my loving feelings?
I have thought it to be a fear of the painful
Loss of the loving flow of feelings between
My Self and those I love
When a loved one is angry with their Self and
With my Self, and then moves to anger at me, blaming, shaming.
That loved one may be another person or me alone
When either of us is angry with my Self,
And moves to anger at me, blaming, shaming.
Anger with me feels like a struggle to share,
Anger at me feels like an attack.

In those times, there is that fear of the painful
Loss of the loving flow of feelings,
A desperately lonely fear of the loss of the feelings of connection
With those I love.
In those times, there is also another fear –
A terror of death – and even more frightening,
A wish to die.

1994,95

WITHDRAWAL

Startled, I watch the trees color their leaves
And begin to lay them gently on the ground.
A chill is in the air.
"So soon!" I cry, "I'm not ready!"
"I thought you'd keep those lively leaves a little longer!"
So, I feel you shedding your closeness to me again.
Startled, I wonder if it's but another season
In our love. Will you grow another
Closeness to me in some spring time?
Or will your love for me remain a stately,
Dormant tree? Beautiful, deep-rooted,
Bare and motionless

1976

TENDERNESS

What is this deep and overwhelming tenderness?
I thought it our creation.
Or your gift to me – starved as I was.
But that would make us precious – or me unworthy.

I sense our tenderness is a vast, echoing cathedral,
A place of reverence – opening.
A place we two stubborn, determined explorers
Have sought forever,
Driven by unconscious visions
And encouraged by but partial successes,
A place we were unable to enter alone.

Now with you, I am awe-struck
As we walk together in this new world.
Everything is here, even more memories.

Our tenderness is a hallowed place.
It is a way of being.
A way that transforms my life.

1982

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