How Xander Harris Saved the World: A Pop-Culture Dramatization of the Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

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"It's about the power." – Willow Rosenberg

Abstract

In this paper I briefly outline sources of understanding transformative human relationships, including quantitative and qualitative research and ethics. I present an argument for drama as another useful source of understanding such relationships. I then explore Rogers’ (1959) necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change (the core conditions) vis-à-vis the television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I present scenes from Buffy the Vampire Slayer as case studies, and analyse them to reveal what can happen when the core conditions break down or are not present in a transformative relationship. I also use material from these scenes to demonstrate the transformative power of the core conditions when they are fully present.

Science and Ethics as Sources of Understanding Transformative Relationships

The Scientific Thread

Carl Rogers presented his hypothesis regarding the necessary and sufficient conditions of personality change in 1957. Since then, as noted by Bozarth and Motornasa (2005, p. 296) “The research on the necessary and sufficient conditions dominated common factor psychotherapy outcome studies during the latter part of the 1950s into the 1980s...During this time there was substantial research supporting Rogers’ postulates of the attitudinal conditions.” (cf. Elliot, 2002; Bozarth, 1998; and Patterson, 1984 for a more complete discussion of the research findings that support the core conditions). As the current debate surrounding empirically supported practices rages on (Norcross, Beutler and Levant, 2006), research into client, therapist, and relationship factors continues to be an important part of the dialogue (c.f. Beutler and Johannsen, 2006; Bohart, 2006; Duncan and Miller, 2006; Greenberg and Watson, 2006; Norcross and Lambert, 2006). It would appear that the six conditions that Rogers hypothesized as necessary and sufficient for therapeutic personality change (1957, 1959) remain highly relevant. Rogers (1959) delineated these conditions as follows:
1. That two persons are in contact.
2. That the first person, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable, or anxious.
3. That the second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent in the relationship.
4. That the therapist is experiencing unconditional positive regard toward the client.
5. That the therapist is experiencing an empathic understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference.
6. That the client perceives, at least to a minimal degree, conditions 4 and 5, the unconditional positive regard of the therapist for him, and the empathic understanding of the therapist. (p. 213)

Qualitative research has emerged as an important source of support for the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change. Freire (2005), for example, analyses client-centered therapy sessions from the perspectives of both the therapist and client. With other researchers at the Delphos Institute in Brazil, she undertook a massive qualitative study that examines transcripts of therapy sessions from entire courses of treatment. In analysing the client’s experience of the therapeutic outcomes, Freire concluded:

The therapeutic outcomes found in this present study support a non-directive therapeutic stance and directly contradict Sachse and Elliott’s (2002) conclusion that ‘additional therapeutic strategies appear to be needed to influence outcome favorably’ (p. 100). In fact, the analysis of Julia’s case supports the assertion that a psychological environment free of threat and rich in unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding, promoted by a non-directive client-centred therapeutic relationship, is sufficient to tap the client’s vast inner resources for growth and development. (p. 136)

The Ethical Thread

“Is our philosophy one in which respect for the individual is uppermost? Do we respect his capacity and right to self-direction, or do we basically believe that his life would be best guided by us?” (Rogers, 1951, p. 20)

A thorough reading of the Person-Centered literature reveals the presence of two significant threads, scientific and ethical. Confusion in person-centered circles often centres around not recognizing these distinct threads (Moon, 2003). The radical nature of client-centered therapy lies in its ethical considerations, in its answers to basic questions such as the ones posed by Rogers above, regarding what it means to value another individual. Proctor (2005, p. 238) makes an important ethical distinction:
The fundamental ethical principle behind PCT, and specifically Client-Centered Therapy... is the autonomy of the client, as opposed to the moral principle of beneficence (doing what’s judged to be best for the client) employed by many other models of therapy.

A consistent set of values that respect individual freedom and the client’s right to self-direction and self-determination pervades Rogers’ body of work (cf. Rogers 1951, 1961, 1977, and 1980). Rogers (1951) and other Client-Centered practitioners and theorists (eg., Brodley, 1997; Bozarth, 1998; Patterson, 2000; Levitt, 2005) take a stance that runs counter to the medical model and most forms of psychotherapy: the client is the expert. The core conditions are thus understood in Client-Centered therapy as an expression of this ethical stance of non-directivity – they are framed by it and are inseparable from it (Levitt, 2005).

Levitt and Brodley (2005) explore a non-directive client-centered therapy demonstration session by analysing an audio-taped transcript for non-directivity’s footprints. They observe that the client is directing therapy – the therapist’s only goal is to understand the client’s meanings. In other words, they reiterate the fundamental stance of an ethically-based non-directive orientation – the client is the expert.

Grant (2004) asserts that psychotherapy can be viewed entirely as an ethical endeavour. Grant (2005) offers that respect for self-direction is central to non-directive ethics in psychotherapy when he states, “The practice of non-directive client-centered therapy can be justified solely in terms of the principle of respect for clients’ right to self-determination” (p. 248). Based on this ethical perspective, non-directive therapists “believe that everything clients do – talking, sitting, staring out of windows in silence, holding legs and rocking – expresses their right to self-determine their lives” (p. 252).

Witty (2005) reminds us that “All psychotherapies may be analyzed as occasions of social influence” (p. 228). From this perspective, she justifies the non-directive attitude as a necessary compass to protect clients from therapist and therapeutic harm.

**Drama as a Source of Understanding**

“A well-told story can often reach deeper into the human heart than a rational argument.” (Schudt, 2003, pp. 33-34)

Freud recognized the power of mythic drama as a source of understanding transformative relationships. One of his most famous and controversial theoretical formulations is couched in the ancient myth of Oedipus. To make a long, dramatic story short, despite warning and driven by pride, Oedipus killed his father and had sex with (married) his mother. Freud recognized in this ancient dramatic myth, a fundamental human struggle in relationships and development. Simply stated, at some point as children we each must face the reality that someone we love and who loves us (often mother) also loves and is loved by someone else (often father). How we come to terms with the idea that someone’s love for us is not diminished by their love for someone else seems to be a universal crisis we must face as humans. In borrowing the Oedipal myth, Freud captured this understanding of the dramatic nature of human development. What
impact this very human crisis has on our personality, the development of and drama can play in understanding human nature, and specifically, how it can help us to see psychotherapeutic concepts and transformative relationships in a different light.

Stiles (2006) underscores the importance of finding alternative sources of understanding that are perhaps more compelling than dry facts and will help practitioners to more fully engage in thinking about the issues generally addressed by quantitative research:

Practioners have been chronically unhappy with psychotherapy research...They often find statistical hypothesis studies too narrow, tedious, and too decontextualized to be assimilated into their practice. Many difficulties have contributed to the research-practice gap, of course, but case studies might address some of them. (p.63)

He makes a strong argument for case studies as a valuable part of our ongoing discussions and learning, noting that

A few systematically analyzed cases that match a theory in precise or unexpected detail may give people considerable confidence in the theory as a whole. Even though each component assertion may remain tentative and uncertain when considered separately. Classic examples of such cases would include Dora for psychoanalysis, Little Albert for behaviourism, and Dibs for nondirective play therapy. (p. 60-61)

Case studies are indeed a rich source of understanding. Drama, too, can be approached as a form of case study that might address some of our “unhappiness” with more traditional research. Drama has great potential in helping us to better understand ourselves and others. Case studies drawn from drama have a very human appeal – the connections that we make and extend to our own therapeutic practice are often grasped or felt in a very immediate and intimate way.

Schudt (2003) provides the following argument:

The appreciation of drama is an empathic project. The audience must be able to feel what the characters are feeling...The commonality between the characters in the drama and human nature is what gives the key...If the drama is well executed, the characters will act as real humans would act in similar situations. So the inquirer can use the fictional character's life as an experiment, a test-case: what would this life be like? If the results are believable and if we are able to empathize with the character, then the characterization may be an accurate description of what would happen. (pp. 21-22)

To my knowledge, drama has not been explored as a way of shedding light on non-directive theory and practice. Science (including qualitative study) and ethics have been used routinely as sources of persuasion. Here I will turn to drama, and in particular, a pop-culture drama: Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Empathy for the characters may bring a

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new and perhaps convincing understanding of the core conditions as a powerful relational force for constructive personality change. Readers may be persuaded to consider non-directivity in a new light.

**Buffy the Vampire Slayer as a Pop-Culture Case Study**

*Taking Buffy Seriously – The Emergence of Buffy Studies*

“How okay, this is where I have a problem. See, because we’re talking about vampires. We’re having a *talk* with vampires in it.” – Xander Harris

(http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/season1/transcripts/02_tran.shtml)

How can anyone take a show with vampires in it and a hero named Buffy, a show with the title *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, seriously? In fact, scholars from many disciplines take Buffy very seriously, resulting in the emergence of a new field of study – Buffy Studies. This new field has spawned annual interdisciplinary conferences, as well as scores of scholarly papers and books on wide-ranging topics. A brief review of some of the themes explored in Buffy Studies gives an idea of the scope of this field, and the actual complexity of the television series itself. Among the disciplines represented in an online Buffy Studies bibliography (http://www.slayage.tv) are the following: aesthetics, business ethics, classical studies, cosmology, criminal justice, cultural studies, feminist studies, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy/ethics, post colonial studies, post modern studies, political science, psychology, psychiatry, queer studies and theology.

*Introduction to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the Television Series*

“How alright. The Slayer hunts vampires, Buffy is a Slayer, don’t tell anyone. Well, I think that’s all the vampire information you need.” – Rupert Giles

(http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/season1/transcripts/02_tran.shtml)

Actually, if you are not a Buffy geek like myself, you will need a little more information than Rupert Giles (Buffy’s “Watcher,” mentor and friend) provides. Buffy Summers not only hunts vampires, but in general confronts the forces of evil in various forms. She has superpowers, but is also a high school student when the series begins. She longs to leave her calling as the Chosen One for a normal life. She befriends Willow Rosenberg and Xander Harris (themselves already lifelong friends). Throughout the series, Willow and Xander help Buffy in the fight against evil. Along the way, they make the journey from adolescence to adulthood, a true hero’s journey. Willow, initially a “mousy” (her own description) bookworm, develops into a powerful witch as the series progresses. She is powerful enough to bring Buffy back from the dead at the beginning of Season Six. Xander, by contrast, develops no supernatural powers to match Buffy or Willow. However, Buffy’s younger sister does point out in the final season, in an episode appropriately titled “Potential,” that perhaps Xander’s power is “Seeing. Knowing.”

(http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/season7/transcripts/134_tran.php)

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Though the title suggests a combination of horror and fluff, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is multilayered in a way that defies definition by genre. This unique television series is ultimately about growth and relationships - struggling with inner demons and facing the demands of life, alone and with friends. And, oh yes, it is also “about the power.”

**Introducing the Pop-Culture Case-Studies**

“Oh, come on! This is Sunnydale! How bad an evil can there be here?” – Buffy Summers  
(http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/season1/transcripts/01_tran.shtml)

It should come as no surprise that evil is a pervasive theme on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This is a television series that regularly looks at evil as a part of every day life. Generally this evil is seen in demons, and sometimes in humans who, in various ways, come under their influence. However, in the sixth season, the face of evil changes. The evil characters are not demons or the demon-influenced, they are all very human: a trio of geeks (actually self-named “The Trio”) and Willow Rosenberg. Because it is a season of human confrontations with human evil, it offers a telling glimpse at a variety of reactions to evil.

I have chosen two scenes from Season Six of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to serve as our pop-culture case studies. Both present encounters with “Evil Willow,” though these encounters are markedly different. It is important not to read the scenes offered in this paper as therapy sessions. They are not dramatizations of therapy sessions, yet they are useful as indicators of possible outcomes in transformative relationships. As Bozarth (1998, p. 168) points out, “the conclusions of psychotherapy research suggest, as Rogers proposed, that the conditions can be embedded in other forms of therapy and helping situations.” We can thus look at the scenes that follow as dramatic case studies that encapsulate two different methods or ways of being in the “helping situation.” Therapists can of course be forgiven if they make the entirely reasonable leap of examining their own practices vis-à-vis these pop-culture case studies.

Our first scene is a confrontation between Buffy and Willow. Willow has been consumed by grief and rage over her partner Tara’s senseless murder. Turning to the “darkest magicks,” Willow is transformed, becoming the most powerful person on the planet. Her appearance reflects her transformation – her hair has turned from red to jet black, her eyes have become menacing black orbs, and her skin is now pale and “veiny.” Just prior to our first scene, Willow has tortured and flayed alive Tara’s killer, one of the geeks in the trio mentioned above. Now she is bent on exacting revenge on the two surviving members of the Trio, and Buffy is trying to stop her...

**Case Study #1**

In which our hero, Buffy Summers, faces evil, diagnoses it and tries to kick its ass  
(http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/season6/transcripts/121_tran.shtml)
BUFFY1: Willow, I know what you want to do, but you have to listen to me. The forces inside you are incredibly powerful. They're strong ... but you're stronger... You have to remember you're still Willow.

WILLOW1: (scoffs) Let me tell you something about Willow. (advancing toward Buffy) She's a loser. And she always has been. People picked on Willow in junior high school, high school, up until college. With her stupid mousy ways. And now? Willow's a junkie.

BUFFY2: I can help.

WILLOW2: The only thing Willow was ever good for...

She pauses, drops the bitter sarcasm and grows pensive.

WILLOW3: ...the only thing I had going for me ... were the moments - just moments - when Tara would look at me and I was wonderful. (grimly) And that will never happen again.

BUFFY3: I know this hurts. Bad. But Willow, if you let loose with the magicks, it will never end.

WILLOW4: (smiles nastily) Promise?

BUFFY4: You don't want that.

WILLOW5: Why not?

BUFFY5: Because you lose everything. Your friends, your self... Willow, if you let this control you then the world goes away. And all of us with it. There's so much to live for. (forcefully) Will, there's too much.

WILLOW6: (scoffs) Oh, please! This is your pitch? Buffy, you hate it here as much as I do. I'm just more honest about it.

[Their confrontation escalates in a later scene – things are not going well for our hero]

BUFFY6: Are we really gonna do this?

WILLOW7: Come on, this is a huge deal for me! Six years as a side man, and now I get to be the Slayer.

BUFFY7: A killer isn't a Slayer. Being a Slayer means something you can't conceive of.

WILLOW8: (sighing, shaking her head) Oh, Buffy. You really need to have every square inch of your ass kicked.

BUFFY8: Then show me what you got. And I'll show you what a Slayer really is.

Ultimately, Buffy is unable to stop Willow. What began as Willow's errand of revenge against three people escalates wildly out of control. Willow comes to recognize not only her own pain, but the pain suffered by all others around the world (her magic causes her literally to experience all of this at once). To put herself and the world out of this misery, she magically raises a demonic temple and uses it as a focal point to channel her power to destroy the entire planet. She intends, literally, to end it all. Buffy remains powerless to stop her.

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How Did Helping Go So Wrong?

Wanting to help can become an exercise of power. Such a statement may seem counterintuitive. After all, how can wanting to help be an exercise of power over another? Isn’t it good to help others? The heart of this problem lies in just what exactly it means to help, and who is defining what help should be.

In our first dramatic case study, Buffy is not being empathic to Willow’s internal frame or following Willow’s direction. Rather she is following her own inclinations, her own direction — to help according to her own definition of help. She misses the point that Willow really does want to end it all.

Buffy is unable to be with her in that feeling, particularly as she has struggled so much to stay in the world herself. Buffy wants Willow to be who she was, to turn her back before it is too late. She tries to remind Willow of who she was, perhaps thinking that if Willow sees who she was, she will stop this obviously irrational behavior. But this is not what Willow wants. She is not looking for help, or to be who she was. Buffy operates entirely out of her own frame and never grasps Willow’s (e.g., Buffy2, Buffy4). It is not surprising that the help she offers simply does not fit. In fact, it leads to an escalation of Willow’s anger and aggression.

Reality Correction — Forcing Change, Forcing Help

Buffy’s idea of help is a form of imposing “reality correction.” She tells Willow what reality is or should be for her (e.g., Buffy1). As Sommerbeck (2005) notes with regard to people experiencing “psychosis”:

‘Reality correction’ is, by its very nature, confrontational and patients with a diagnosis of psychosis feel, in general, threatened by confrontational approaches. Confronted with ‘reality correction’ they often tend to defend their conception of reality, thereby rigidifying and solidifying it and often expanding on it with more details and nuances, thereby developing their psychotic ideation further. In short, they can become more psychotic when confronted with ‘reality correction.’ (p. 323)

Willow reacts strongly to Buffy’s attempt to impose reality on her. She opposes it forcefully, and Buffy’s attempts to “help” result in much unintended, catastrophic consequences.

Diagnosis — Introducing Conditionality and Reducing Empathy

Buffy regularly looks evil in the face and recognizes her job. After all, she is The Slayer, this is what she does. When she encounters Willow, she tries to see her friend, but ultimately she sees evil — she is unable to see that there is still some positive striving, no matter how twisted, in Willow’s actions and statements. She “diagnoses” Willow, and then tries to interact with her based on her diagnosis. Buffy expects Willow to change in her direction and at her pace, not Willow’s chosen direction and pace. When this fails, Buffy tries to kick her ass, the ultimate “reality correction,” to show her “what a Slayer

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really is.” Willow has been reduced to a diagnosis, a problem. However, in Willow, Buffy is facing another human, not a diagnostic category. Her act of diagnosis is actually an act of violence that diminishes Willow’s humanity. Yet in Buffy’s eyes, and perhaps much of the viewing audience, Willow is the “evil” one.

Diagnostic or directive empathy is empathy to an external theory and not to the client’s internal frame (Levitt, 2005). “The perceived problem of diagnosis is that it labels and fixes the client—the fear is that therapy becomes problem-driven rather than client-centred” (Wilkins, 2005, p. 143). For whatever reasons, Buffy is unable to embrace the evil she sees, to have unconditional positive regard for it and for Willow. Buffy judges Willow as evil, and she lets her know this. Perhaps this because she is not able to accept her own wish for everything to end, or perhaps because she is unable to face her own “evil” possibilities. Ultimately, we may never know the reasons for Buffy’s reactions to Willow, and a guess would only serve to diagnose Buffy. What we do see is that Buffy is unable to hold unconditional positive regard for Willow—she is unable to embrace her “evil.”

To avoid the evil, however understandable, is to demonise the distressed person. The Other is forced to carry that which I cannot face. So much of the medicalisation of human distress is designed to keep the medic safe, at the cost of the client’s humanity. (Worsley, 2005, p. 156)

Incongruence

To make matters worse, Buffy is incongruent in her encounter with Willow. She is incongruent in trying to sell Willow on a life she herself struggles to believe in. Her speech sounds hollow, and Willow hears this (Willow6). She perceives that Buffy is not being entirely genuine.

Another congruence issue arises in Buffy taking on her role as Slayer. Buffy sees herself vis-à-vis her role as The Slayer. She recognizes her job, her mission, which is to fight evil. Willow becomes her mission statement. Buffy the Slayer comes before Buffy the friend, or even more basically, Buffy the human being.

Conditional regard can also signal an issue of incongruence. “A killer isn’t a Slayer” are Buffy’s words (Buffy7). They present a clear judgement. Buffy in fact struggles throughout the series with her own potential for evil—her superpowers, we find out, are demonic in origin and she fights to avoid looking at this reality. This is a form of defensiveness that signals a lack of congruence, and Willow’s response captures the judgement she hears in this incongruity (Willow8).

Conclusions Regarding Our First Case Study

Buffy and Willow never really get past the first and second of Rogers’ conditions. There is contact between Buffy and Willow (condition 1), and Willow is in a state of incongruence (condition 2). However, Buffy is also incongruent in the relationship (lack of condition 3). She is unable to offer unconditional positive regard (lack of condition 4). She is also unable to be empathic to Willow’s internal frame (lack of condition 5). As Buffy is not able to offer these core conditions, Willow, by default, is not able to perceive
them in Buffy’s expression or being (there is no possibility for condition 6). What we see in Willow is that her psychological distress escalates after her encounters with Buffy:

For people to actualize their inherent optimal nature they require the right social environment. Without the right social environment the inherent tendency towards growth can become thwarted and usurped leading instead to psychological distress and dysfunction. (Joseph and Worsley, 2005, p. 349).

Case Study #2

In which our other hero, Xander Harris, faces evil, sees his friend, and genuinely offers his unconditional love and understanding.

Buffy’s encounter with Willow points out, rather dramatically, that when the core conditions (Rogers, 1959) are not present, a helping relationship is likely to fail. Xander offers a glimpse at another possibility in human relations.

We now rejoin the show with Willow in the midst of destroying the world, green magic flowing from her to the demonic temple she has raised to focus her power. Xander steps between her and the temple, blocking the flow of magic with his body...

(http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/season6/transcripts/122_tran.shtml)

WILLOW1: You can’t stop this.
XANDER1: Yeah, I get that. It’s just, where else am I gonna go? You’ve been my best friend my whole life. World gonna end ... where else would I want to be?
WILLOW2: (scornfully) Is this the master plan? You’re going to stop me by telling me you love me?
XANDER2: Well, I was going to walk you off a cliff and hand you an anvil, but ... it seemed kinda cartoony.
WILLOW3: Still making jokes.
XANDER3: I’m not joking. I know you’re in pain. I can’t imagine the pain you’re in. And I know you’re about to do something apocalyptically (glancing back at the statue) evil and stupid, and hey. (spreading out his arms) I still want to hang. You’re Willow.
WILLOW4: (angry) Don’t call me that.
XANDER4: First day of kindergarten. You cried because you broke the yellow crayon, and you were too afraid to tell anyone. You’ve come pretty far, ending the world, not a terrific notion. But the thing is? Yeah. I love you. I loved crayon-breaking Willow and I love ... scary veiny Willow. So if I’m going out, it’s here. If you wanna kill the world? Well, then start with me. I’ve earned that.
WILLOW5: (upset) You think I won’t?
XANDER5: It doesn’t matter. I’ll still love you.

Willow and Xander continue their exchange. Xander never backs off from his position of love for his friend, despite Willow’s continued attempts to destroy the world.

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and his being physically battered in the process. He manages to remain grounded, congruent, in the face of something truly terrifying, and steadfast in his love and understanding. Eventually, as the transcript notes:

Willow continues holding out her hand and making the magic gesture, but nothing happens. She starts to get teary. Willow starts to cry and, as Xander gets right up to her, she starts hitting him with her fists. Xander just stands there and takes it. After a moment she stops hitting and starts to cry for real. She falls to her knees and Xander kneels with her, puts his arms around her and holds her while she sobs. As Willow continues to cry in Xander’s arms, the veins fade away from her face and her hair returns to its usual red.

Xander and Willow are in contact (see Rogers 1959, condition 1), as were Buffy and Willow. However, the quality of that contact is very different.

**Letting Go of Power – A Non-Directive Stance**

It is an interesting fact, often ignored, that we have no power to help people if they do not want to be helped, no power to change people if they do not want to change. We are in fact powerless over others in this sense. As the old joke goes:

Q: How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?
A: One, but the light bulb has to want to change first.

Facing another person in a true encounter, and recognizing our powerlessness, is no small task. It does require, in some sense, the power of a superhero. Xander, in his encounter with Willow, is a reminder of the power of non-directive encounter, a different kind of power altogether.

In facing “Evil Willow,” her friends face someone more powerful than anyone else in the world, and so they face their own powerlessness. The beauty of drama is that it allows us a safe distance to witness such extreme examples of facing powerlessness. Of all the characters in this drama, only Xander realizes that he has no power to change Willow, and only Xander fully accepts this (see Willow1, Xander1). As Frankl (1985) explains, even in the most hopeless and horrible of circumstances, with no power to change the situation itself, there is still the power to face it in the way we choose – Xander faces it by remaining Xander and remaining true to his best friend.

Xander has no agenda but to be with Willow. He recognizes his powerlessness in a way that Buffy never does. As the Slayer, being powerless is not an option. Xander is only Xander, and he knows he has no superpowers. He does not try to change Willow. He only tries to *be* with her, fully himself, fully accepting her. He has a true encounter with Willow.

Xander may hope that his encounter with Willow will help her in some way, just as a non-directive therapist may hold such hope for his or her client. As Sommerbeck (2005) notes: 

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Of course the therapist hopes that the relationship, in general, will benefit the client, but in a very basic sense he or she meets the client with an offer of interest rather than with an offer of help. The therapist tries to experience the client's momentary psychological landscape as the client experiences it; he or she has no wish to change the client in any way, only to get to know the client to the degree the client allows it. (p. 334)

**Congruence**

Xander faces evil and recognizes his friend. His jokes may give him some relief in facing his powerlessness, but ultimately he does not deny it. It is a momentary defense that allows him to stay present (see Xander2 and Xander3). He is always aware of who he is and that he is indeed powerless to change Willow. He does not try to hide behind a role to deal with it or give himself power. While we saw Buffy overidentify with her role (Buffy is The Slayer), Xander is free from roles. He does not take on a role, and so there is nothing getting in the way of being genuinely himself. He is not once removed from the encounter with Willow by taking on a role. Xander remains Xander.

Willow recognizes that Xander is not being something other than himself. She recognizes that he is not selling her anything, and not being incongruent. He is true to his wise-cracking nature, and true to his belief in who Willow is as his friend. He does not run, and does not try to change or manipulate her. He simply is with her, with Willow, wherever she happens to be in that moment.

**Unconditional Positive Regard**

In Xander we are seeing a very different encounter with “evil.” Xander recognizes his friend, evil behaviour or not. Xander recognizes that Willow is Willow, whatever she does, and however she looks (Xander4). He loves her regardless. He offers true unconditional positive regard. He does not diagnose her as evil, and therefore does not miss who is facing him:

The medical model reduces the role of the helper in contact with the client to that of the expert who keeps herself safe by distancing and objectifying the client's extreme and disturbing distress. Yet, it is a most valuable insight of the Person-Centred Approach that what we term psychopathological in human beings is also the unique and undiagnosable response of a human being to her environment. When the therapist can remain open to the impact of the client upon her, she will be available to share in the journey towards renormalisation, and then integration and wholeness. (Worsley, 2005, p. 156)

This can only occur when the therapist is open to herself first. Congruence is an essential condition for holding unconditional positive regard for the other. Xander appears to be open to himself, and so he is open to Willow as she is.

It is often difficult for those struggling with the concept of non-directivity to understand that the therapist is not endorsing actions or beliefs of the other by being empathic and holding unconditional positive regard. With Xander, we see a good
example of how non-directivity is not an endorsement of "evil." Xander is not in any way saying that he agrees with Willow’s actions, or that he endorses them. What he does is understand them as expressions of Willow, to be valued no less than any other part of her. Though on the surface Xander's response to Willow (Xander 3) may seem judgemental, Xander nonetheless maintains unconditional positive regard for Willow without endorsing her actions. What we hear from Xander is that everything Willow does is still "Willow" in his eyes, and she is still his friend.

**Empathic Understanding**

Xander understands Willow. He gets where she is at. In Rogers’ (1957) language, he is empathic to her internal frame. Xander knows Willow is in pain, and that she intends to destroy the world and does not want help. He does not try to change this in any way, adding clarity to his empathic understanding. He communicates his understanding in a very clear and simple way and Willow hears him. There is no empathic break, no imposition of “reality correction,” no deciding for Willow what kind of help, if any, she should receive. There is only understanding, and a desire to be with her. Sommerbeck (2005) provides us with the appropriate parallel to psychotherapy:

Contrary to this myth of collusion, it has been my experience, from my work in a psychiatric hospital, that it is ‘reality correction’ that is potentially harmful to clients diagnosed with a psychosis, not expressions of empathic understanding—and that it is expressions of empathic understanding that are beneficial, not ‘reality correction.’ (p. 323)

**The Sixth Condition**

“Rogers’ sixth condition is crucial; namely, that the client perceives the therapist’s experiencing of unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding” (Bozarth and Motomasa, 2005, p. 306). If the client does not perceive the core conditions (conditions 3, 4, and 5) in the therapist, it does not matter how well the therapist embodies them. The client’s perception that the therapist is embodying the core conditions is necessary for the relationship to be transformative.

Willow clearly did not experience this sixth condition with Buffy, because Buffy never offered the “therapist” conditions (conditions 3, 4 and 5) in their encounter. Xander does offer unconditional positive regard and empathy, and it seems that Willow does perceive these things in Xander. In fact, Xander genuinely makes it clear that Willow can choose any path, even killing him and destroying the world, and he will still love her. This is the key.

In Xander’s encounter with Willow, all six of the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change are met. Willow and Xander are in contact (condition 1). Willow is in intense psychological distress, and is thus incongruent in the relationship (condition 2). Xander is congruent, or “integrated” in the relationship. He is real, genuine (condition 3). This congruence supports his capacity for unwavering love for Willow, despite her frightening acts and appearance. He shows her unconditional positive regard (condition 4). Because of his congruence, Xander is also able to
empathically follow Willow from her own frame. (condition 5). And in the end, Willow perceives these conditions as attitudes that are present in Xander (condition 6). This is when Willow’s constructive potential emerges. Xander, in his encounter with Willow, surrenders completely to her direction, even if it means that he may be killed and the world may be destroyed. Presaging his hypothesis of the power of the core conditions in effecting personality change, Rogers (1951) captures the significance of Xander’s non-directive stance when he states:

To me it appears that only as the therapist is completely willing that any outcome, any direction may be chosen, only then does he realize the vital strength of the capacity and potentiality of the individual for constructive action. (p. 48)

This dramatic statement is all the more compelling, now that we have come to the end of our sojourn into drama as a potential alternative to scientific research and ethical treatises in understanding human relationships. If a drama is convincing, it should provide us with viable case study material that is every bit as alive as the material found in traditional case studies. If these dramatic case studies elicit in us a real and lively connection with theory, and a deeper examination of our own psychotherapy practices, then they are a valuable resource. It does not matter that the characters are not real and that their circumstances are exaggerated. What matters is whether these stories can be experienced as real and instructive. Finally, if we care for the characters, and are drawn into a greater awareness of the human experience that allows us to see beyond what at first appears to be evil or pathological, then drama is a precious gift.

References


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