

“Wasn’t I Good?” An Encounter on the Way to Understanding the Person-Centered Approach

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Abstract

I present reflections on a person-centered encounter with a client while a graduate student, including a discussion of my spirituality, personal understanding of good, and choice of the Person-Centered Approach as a professional foundation. I had read, talked with my professors and colleagues, and examined my own experiences in order to understand the Person Centered Approach (PCA). This seems now to have been a prelude to an encounter that stays in my heart, demanding my attention—an encounter that integrated my spiritual and person-centered self.

The Encounter

I am employed as an associate teacher at a school for children diagnosed with emotional or behavioral disorders. During the course of any given day, I find myself with a student who is resisting the direction of a teacher. During one such encounter, I made the conscious decision to respond in accordance with the PCA, my newly emerging way of being. I quote from my notes of the encounter (Smith, 2002):

I discover S. outside the classroom, walking up and down the hall. He had been on his way to math class. He tells me he doesn’t feel good. I ask if he wants to see the nurse. He says no, he wants to see Miss B. (an advisor). He takes off and I go along. (I had said, “Okay.”) He goes in, and Miss B. and Mr. B. (also an advisor) say—“What are you doing here? You were just here a few minutes ago.” He walks around the room, says he knows. Then we hear another student shouting in the hall. S. is distracted and listens, and says that Mr. Y. (the one with the other student) is mean. The advisors tell S. he’d better get back to his class. We leave and go around the corner to our area. S. stops outside our room, which is one down from his math class. I stop. I am standing on a square in the linoleum surrounded by a larger square. S. starts walking around me on the larger square

S: I don’t care, I’m not going to math class.

M: You really don’t want to go to that math class.

S: No, and I’m not going.

M: You definitely don’t want to go to math class, you just don’t want to.

S: I can’t go because I don’t feel good, my throat hurts.

M: Oh I see, you don’t feel good so you can’t go to math class.

S: My throat hurts too much.

M: You’re just not physically able to go to that math class.

S. leaves the square path around me and walks down the hall to the math class. He knocks, opens the door, and says to the teacher in a very moderate tone, "I can't come to math class because I don't feel good." Then he closes the door and walks toward me. He is smiling.

S: Wasn't I good? I was appropriate and everything.

M: You were great.

S: I want to go see the nurse.

M: Okay.

As we walked down the steps to the nurse's office, I carry two predominant feelings. I feel stunned that I am able to simply be present to S. as he is in the moment. I feel uncomfortable with my statement, "You were great." The first feeling is one of deep awareness that all I have been reading appears to be true. Empathy, genuineness, unconditional positive regard, in concert with the necessary conditions described by Carl Rogers (1959), are indeed sufficient to foster an encounter between two human beings who are in *contact*. The client experiences *incongruence*, even as the therapist is *congruent* in terms of their *relationship*. The client perceives the therapist's *unconditional positive regard* toward the client as well as the therapist's *empathic* understanding of the client's *internal frame of reference* (Rogers, 1959, p. 213).

The second feeling, my discomfort, gnaws at me for weeks. I now identify this feeling as discomfort with my apparent judgment of S. based on his action. I am, to a certain degree, complicit in what I recognize as the school milieu that describes the good student as the one who conforms to prescribed standards of behavior. I am both saddened and excited by this awareness. I embrace my awareness as an opening movement in my deeper conversion to the PCA, a way of being that I find not only professionally appealing, but also personally liberating.

In the course of my reflection, some two weeks after the encounter with S., I come to another stunning moment of awareness. I see in my mind the happiness, the exhilaration in S.'s face as he walks toward me saying, "Wasn't I good?" I suddenly, startlingly, understand the moment in a clearer light. He is not asking me a question. His statement is rhetorical. He is overjoyed by his way of being with his math teacher. S. shares with me his self-understanding in the moment. My smile, my hands clasped in joy for him as he walks toward me, constitutes my true human response, regardless of the possible judgment in my spoken words. I even wonder if he hears my words.

Clearly this encounter with S. is a charged moment for me. His statement, "Wasn't I good?" has a compelling attraction for me. Reviewing this moment in my mind, I wonder what I might have said to S. that would have better reflected what I wanted to convey. I would prefer to have responded, "You are good!" On this printed page, I have difficulty conveying this phrase in the manner that I would want to say it to him. I see S.'s self-affirmation glowing from his eyes, and I want to meet him in the energy and intonation of his own phrasing: "Wasn't I good?" "You are good!"

I have found myself reflecting on the meaning of "good" for me. I offer a definition: "Good" is the fullness of living who I am. I find support for my definition in Carl Rogers' concept of the good life as a "process, not a state of being" (1961, p. 186). Rogers' insight that this process seems to be characterized by trust in the self-actualizing tendency is particularly pertinent to my own personal understanding and to what I perceived of S.'s

self-experience. From my perspective, I cannot resolve the possible interpretations of S.'s statement, "Wasn't I good?" He may have been seeking my approval for his actions. Indeed, I sense that I initially heard S.'s statement as being his pleasure in doing something that I would approve. The second interpretation dawned on me slowly. As I continued to reflect, I realized that he might have been expressing externally his pleasure in knowing his own fullness, his own genuineness and congruence.

My Spirituality

The realization that I may have been witnessing S.'s pleasure in his own fullness of being, reverberated deeply within my own sense of self. Moving back within myself to my childhood, I encounter a sense of satisfaction and completeness in being who I am. As a young child, happiness and self-sufficiency constituted my feeling memory of myself and express what my family remembers about me. I felt loved and cherished. I felt this from my family, my neighborhood friends, and my God. One of my earliest memories centers on the deep joy I felt in the quiet beauty of my church and my felt knowledge of God, the Presence Who loved me (Smith, 2000). My connection with God was deep, intimate, life sustaining, and life affirming.

The term Divine Presence conveys for me the intimacy I experienced with God in childhood. I felt as if God were within me, living my life with me, lovingly present to my every thought, word, and action. The Divine Presence, the person-ness of God, never wavered, though I have wavered in my trust of myself in the relationship. As I grew older, I was educated in Roman Catholic theology and spirituality, and I felt deeply conflicted concerning the goodness of human kind. I absorbed a sense of personal unworthiness and guilt. In my adult years, I engaged in an extended dialogue with theologians and religious educators, seeking to resolve the inner conflicts that tormented me. The discourse enlightened me, and I felt liberated in the process.

I now consider religion to be a social construct that tends to encourage conformity in its followers (Fromm, 1976; Harding, 1965). I chose to move beyond the social construct in order to seek the belief system that underscored my religion. At the heart of the social construct I found a wisdom tradition, an experiential core that has been in some sense distorted in the search for the orderly transmission of religious teachings (Harding, 1965). As an individual, however, I endeavored to encounter the great teachings on my own. I chose to reflect freely, weighing the teachings against my own scholarship and subjective awareness. I believed I could rely on my personal authority and capacity for recognizing the numinous, thus gleaning an understanding of the traditional teachings and a confirmation of my own journey. I looked to the living core of the tradition to validate the emergence of my self in the process of change and growth. I entered into a process of discernment, facing the conflicting messages I carried within my being (English, 1979). Wisdom, the Divine Presence who infuses the wisdom tradition, acted as therapist in this process.

Even as I had absorbed the sense of unworthiness and personal guilt, I had also absorbed the sense of deeply attentive love from the Divine Presence. I sensed unconditional personal regard from the Divine Presence, an experience that far outweighed the conditional regard of religious dogma and sealed the relationship with the Divine Presence as paramount to any construct of religion. Though I had not encountered

the teachings of Carl Rogers, I experienced the transformative elements of the PCA. As my discernment continued, I sought a community of faith that would recognize and affirm my understanding and awareness as congruent within the spiritual tradition that I embrace (Smith, 2000).

Comparable to S., turning toward me to exclaim, “Wasn’t I good?” I turned toward the community of feminist scholars and theologians (Christ & Plaskow, 1992; Schneiders, 1986). Through a long process of prayer and reflection, I have come to a new understanding of core Christian teachings concerning the goodness of each person. I believe that I am good. The exhilaration I personally feel in this awareness of my own goodness linked me with S.’s joy in his goodness. I believe that I am, as in my childhood, filled with the living Divine Presence, not only by my own power to be but also by the urge of Divine Presence which brought me into being and desires that I be in unity with the Divine and all creation. The integrity of this unity rests on mutuality and congruence. The unity offers me the freedom that I draw on as I live the PCA.

I have made the choice to believe in the inner voices that guide me, the voices of my self, my extended community and the Divine Presence. I have come to trust deeply in the mutuality of this triadic relationship. In fact, should my self be at odds with either my extended community or the Divine Presence, I would follow my self. I believe this choice would be congruent with the PCA and with my trust in the unconditional positive regard of the Divine Presence. I have moved in my life from defining my self in the gaze of others through depression and despair to a present sense of deep joy and calm in being who I am (Smith 2000). My discomfort with my apparent judgment of S. was a step along this path. I desire neither to judge nor to be judged, actions that I now consider as part of the social construct of religion. I seek to live the fullness that I found expressed in the wisdom tradition underlying the social constructs of religion, and that I now find expressed in the PCA.

My Person-Centered Self

In a sense, I have come full circle. I stand again in the place where I stood as a child, happy in the fullness of who I am in each moment. Based on my lifetime of learning and reflection, I offer the definition of the good as the fullness of living who one is.

In the encounter with S., I begin to understand how deeply the PCA is at one with my spirituality. S.’s exuberant self-affirmation mingles with my childhood memories of unconditional positive regard from the Divine Presence. My way of being with S. seeks to acknowledge the fullness of his living who he is. His happiness in his own way of being celebrates the joy of the fullness. What a moment!

As I reflect on my statement, “You were great,” I freely acknowledge the ties that have bound me. I am a working part of a school system that is struggling with respecting and affirming the child while getting the child to conform to external standards of what is good. As I reflect on S.’s self-affirming statement, “I was appropriate and everything,” I wonder whether he would be affirmed by many in the school staff. In fact, students are not allowed to open doors in the middle of a class and announce that they have decided they are too sick to go to class. The math teacher in this circumstance did accept that from S. She neither challenged him at the moment, nor later. Nor did she remonstrate with me. I cannot speak for her feeling toward S., but I can say that she allowed him to

express himself, to make his choice without reprimand. Her action encourages my belief that teachers may be open to the PCA, at least as the counselor's way of being. Further experience in the school setting may assist my understanding of the ways in which teachers, administration, and counselors may work together to foster a genuine, empathic atmosphere in which the child may experience unconditional positive regard.

My encounter with S. encourages me to believe that not only is the PCA a revolutionary paradigm, as Bozarth (1998) suggests, but also that the PCA reflects my own personal fullness of being. I wish to be good with others, sharing in human goodness. I experience this inner urge as personally liberating. The PCA fosters my movement away from judging others, which I now find almost impossible as I consider the uniqueness of each person. I seek, as a counselor, to open myself to the living fullness of each client. I experience the PCA as an invitation to sit humbly in the counselor's seat, respectfully open to the person and to the encounter we share.

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