

Observations on Healing and Person-Centered Therapy

David Spahn
Dubuque, Iowa

On the numerous times (beginning in 1974) that I have had opportunities to watch Carl Rogers "be with" a client in a one-to-one therapy demonstration, or "be with" a member of a small encounter group or large community group, I have been particularly impressed by what has appeared to me to be his intense and exclusive focus of attention on the other person. My sensing of this was essentially visual, yet it seemed I also could feel it in other ways. I remember remarking to people on numerous occasions, "Did you see how he was totally focused on the other person? You could just tell that he had nothing else on his mind." This degree of attentiveness is the thing I remember most vividly. It reminded me of my experience in a "psychic healing" workshop.

In 1977 I enrolled in a seminar in which the LeShan method of psychic healing was taught, a method developed by psychologist Lawrence LeShan. Briefly, the process involves an initial period in which the healer does a basic meditation or centering exercise followed by a second period in which the healer directs his attention to the healee in as open and caring a manner as possible, being totally available and open to the person's essence. A third stage follows in which the healer brings his or her consciousness to a point at which his or her perceived reality, healer and healee are one, united. To use LeShan's (1974) words, "They become one entity in a larger context without either of the two losing their individuality" (p. 107).

It is theorized that if this unity or oneness occurs - albeit for an instant - it triggers the self-healing mechanism within the healee. It is not a process by which the healer treats any specific problem; it is not necessary for the healer to know what the ailment is. It is being

with the healee to the degree that the perception of separateness gives way to unity, that seems to allow the healing to take place. Although in the LeShan process no words are spoken, I had the feeling, particularly when I was practicing the second stage of openness, caring, and availability to the other person, that this was basically the same thing I had attempted as a facilitator of basic encounter groups. Also, it seemed similar to what I had seen and otherwise sensed Carl Rogers doing in therapy demonstrations and group discussions.

Observations on Healing and PCA

I have two observations on which I would like to comment. First, the focus of one person's attention upon another is a phenomenon that seems to have potency in and of itself and when done in an open, accepting, caring manner can have therapeutic effects. Secondly, the phenomenon of separateness giving way to unity that is part of the psychic healing experience also seems to be a part of Person-Centered Therapy and to have a therapeutic effect. It appears these two phenomena are related in that the exclusive focus of loving attention facilitates the separateness giving way to unity phenomenon. In addition to the healing and therapy experiences I have described, which seem to point out some of the value of attention, it is noticeable to me in daily life that the attention of other human beings is something people desire to the point of sometimes taking extreme measures to attain it. The numerous clichés about "attention-seeking behavior" and behavioral extinction techniques point to the value placed on human attention. The saying that "indifference is harder to endure than hatred" especially comes to my mind. It seems people generally seek and value to some degree the attention of other human beings.

The second phenomenon, that of separateness giving way to unity, appears from my observation and experience to be a part of Person-Centered Therapy and to be in accord with Rogers' ideas on the evolutionary tendency in man which forms a base for the

Person-Centered Approach. Rogers (1980) states that the evolutionary tendency in man is "to a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system including humankind" (p. 133). Bozarth (1985) states that the Person-Centered Approach "offers a paradigm consistent with the fundamental model of modern physics and the parallel assumptions of the writings of mystics" (p. 180).

Person-Centered Therapy

As a model of therapy, Person-Centered Therapy seems particularly conducive to the separateness giving way to unity concept in that the therapist is free to devote his or her entire being to attending to the client. The therapist does not have to give attention to other tasks, such as, intellectual analysis, directing the client, reinforcing the client, or "proper" responding to the client that other particular models of therapy often require. The therapist is freed of being in charge, or being the "expert," and is free to exclusively follow the client, who is clearly the expert on his or her own subjective experience. The therapist is free to be his or her own genuine self rather than having to respond in a specific manner. Thus, the therapist can be who he or she is, including who he or she is while being totally attentive to the client's world. Empathy sometimes develops into an "altered state" of oneness or unity with the client in which any manifestation of the therapist's being—verbal, physical, a gesture, a look, a touch—communicates to the client that he or she is understood, that the therapist has truly entered his or her world. If the therapist is truly in the other person's world, any genuine response will evidence this presence. Thus, the responses do not have to be, and in fact cannot be, practiced. "Being with" the other person, in a general way, seems to be the primary factor. Any particular responses are then functions of this presence. As Rogers (1980) notes:

I find that when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. Then simply my presence is releasing and helpful to the other. There is nothing I can do to force this experience but when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways which I cannot justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my thought processes. But these strange behaviors turn out to be right, in some odd way: it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present (p. 129).

This statement by Rogers that "our relationship transcends itself and becomes part of the something larger" is similar to the description of the reality which LeShan (1974) described as the one in which healing can take place, "healer and healee become one entity in a larger context without either of the two losing their individuality" (p. 107). This state of transcendence in which unity with individuality is perceived seems to be a phenomenon which facilitates healing and growth in both Rogers and LeShan experiences. In both cases caring is also an important factor. Rogers makes this clear with his emphasis on unconditional positive regard and LeShan (1974) states, "It is essential that there be a deep and intense caring and a viewing of healee and oneself as one" (p. 107).

Implications

From the ideas presented in this paper I would like to suggest that the development of Person-Centered Therapists could be promoted by: 1) practicing the exclusive focus of attention in an open, accepting, caring manner toward another human being. 2)

participating in experiences such as co-facilitating a group with an experienced Person-Centered Therapist in order to provide the student with the opportunity to simply be himself or herself without use of techniques or pre-learned responses. Perhaps as a result, the student/therapist will find that if he or she has a warm, caring attitude and believes in the other person's capacity for self direction, that "being himself or herself" while attending to the other person can be therapeutic.

References

- Bozarth, J. D. (1985). Quantum theory and the person-centered approach. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 64(3), 179-182.
- LeShan, Lawrence (1974). *The Medium, the Mystic and the Physicist*. New York: Random House.
- Rogers, C. R. (1980). *A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Copyright of The Person-Centered Journal is the property of the Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.