

## THOUGHTS ON HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

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I have two observations:

1. Humanistic Psychology, as an institution, has been highly successful in accomplishing one aspect of its intention.
2. It has been surprisingly unsuccessful in other aspects.

### HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY'S SUCCESS

One of Humanistic Psychology's original aims was to be an alternative to the loss of personal dignity and control through diagnostic medicine; to the intellectual and economic slavery of psychoanalysis; to manipulation and the contempt for the human will of behaviorism.

In this regard, it has been surprisingly successful in incorporating (and thus eliminating) its competitors.

Psychoanalysis, whose practice has been discredited due to lack of convincing results, has joined Humanistic Psychology as "psychodynamic brief therapy" and the like.

Behaviorism, which shared psychoanalysis's fascination with the past and its contempt for the human will, and whose foundation theory has proven wrong, has slipped under the Humanistic Psychology umbrella with labels like "cognitive therapy."

It is easy to see the disguises of the most radical medical practices, such as "patient-centered" electroconvulsive shock treatment." However, the directive practices long masquerading as humanistic psychology have more devious disguises. For example, gestalt therapy, NLP, and focusing are both directive and manipulative and their results are questionable.

Many "new age" treatments, such as, iridology, crystallography, chromotherapy, flower recipes, hypnotic channeling and past life regressions and others are both diagnostic and directive.

In spite of the philosophical contradictions, it seems that everything is now Humanistic Psychology.

### THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Although there are perhaps hundreds of professions under the roof of Humanistic Psychology, there is little evidence that most of these activities have heeded Giambattista Vico's 17<sup>th</sup> century appeal to the *eloquentia*, classical concepts of wisdom. Reacting to the decadence of scholastic science of the time, he urged humanists not to merely "speak cleverly," but to say what was "truthful."

Frankly, I do not see that people are having more of Humanistic Psychology's founder Abraham Maslow's "peak experiences." Nor do there seem to be more "self-actualized" people, as he had hoped. The "development of human potential," the promotion of Herbert Otto, does not seem to have been realized on a significant scale. Hardly a grain of "trust" that Jack Gibb taught people to experience through non-verbal exercises in forming community has fallen on the soil of South America.

### **ACCUMULATING, THEN SQUANDERING POTENTIAL**

Thirty years ago in San Diego, there was an extraordinary conjunction of time, place and people. At U.S. International University there was Sidney Jourard (who promoted "self-disclosure" as a path to personal awareness and "transparency" in relations). There was also Carl Rogers (who was exploring the possibilities of client-centered therapy's principles as valid to live by, in couples, in community, in society). There was also Viktor Frankl (who was exploring the human will as an existential approach to psychiatry).

At nearby San Diego State, not long before Herbert Otto (who had an extensive program of research and practice aimed at "developing human potential") was hired, Fritz Perls had given seminars (on what he called, "gestalt therapy"). Later, Martin Buber's translator joined the faculty. About this time, Erving and Miriam Polster arrived to elucidate a humanistic perspective of Perls's directive and manipulative psychotherapy.

In the shade of the University of California's eucalyptus forest, you could find Jack Gibb (whose non-verbal exercises in large groups was fostering trust between people and, therefore, a greater sense of community). There was also Jonas Salk (the inventor of the polio vaccine) and Herbert Marcuse (the influential marxist philosopher who was trying to put economics into human perspective). Perhaps one would glimpse Jacques Cousteau slip into Scripps's Oceanography Institute (where the human's role in the planet's health and potential were a concern). Just a bit up the road in Del Mar, one might have met Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of Humanistic Psychology (giving advice to business). Just down the road, in La Jolla, was Richard Farson (who was the director of Esalen Institute and one of the few sensible voices interpreting the past and anticipating the future)

Without a doubt, there was a concentration of tremendous creativity and promise. The "realization of human potential" was in the air.

Individuals had begun to be more aware of their own sensations, perceptions, innermost feelings, motives and values.

They were becoming able to grasp the circumstances of their life and direct knowledge to the concrete situation.

There relationships were being improved by communication that was more transparent.

They were helping to develop a consciousness of disease prevention, as well as the health of the planet's environment.

They were crafting philosophies to shape economy; rather than let economy shape the human.

They were learning to anticipate the future wisely.

So, what happened? Why did this trend not continue?

One hypothesis is that that was a particular time and place and people that was part of the *zeitgeist*. Time passed.

Another is that the “principles” have been incorporated into the culture. This may also be. However, I do not consider this always a positive outcome. Mostly, innovations were siphoned off into commercial ventures. Clever people (like the EST founders) hastily combined novelties into a package that could be marketed. Sidney Jourard’s “self-disclosure” only raises eyebrows in polite company. While its adjunct, “transparency,” has raised the revenue of television shows such as Oprah into vast dynasties by exploiting fools who wish to show off in front of the camera.

### WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Perhaps there is nothing one can do about such things. Institutions, once launched, always acquire a life of their own: often for the worse. The *zeitgeist* is in flux; here today, gone tomorrow. Ambitious and greedy people will always try to turn a profit with a good thing, even if they have to turn it into a bad thing.

Apparently, there are already enough methods of psychotherapy, enough therapists. It does not help to add more each day (many which are merely combinatorials: such as putting Rogerian attitudes together with Jungian interpretations of symbols). One will not likely find any new creative impulses in organizations of Humanistic Psychology. (1) They will be found where there is a necessity: a problem to be solved, a conflict to be resolved, a work to be done.

My advice to people who are interested in human potential is to look for areas where effort is lacking. Find a need and do what is necessary. Instead of thinking first about what one likes to do, how to create a career? how to help others?; one might think about what needs to be done? who needs what kind of help? can my abilities contribute in a way that it is also constructive to me?

The general question is perhaps, how does a “self-realized” person combine with others into something that makes a whole and not a mere aggregate. Maybe the quality that was never developed along with the enhancement of human potential was “good taste.” That which distinguishes how ingredients combine into a whole that becomes a soup and not merely an mixture of vegetables and spices in hot water. Good taste is what determines the nutritious beauty of plants that give form to a space and deserves the name of garden.

Perhaps if such a sensibility could be revived, what has been said to be the “greatest idea of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, *Bildung zum Menschen* (cultivating the human being), might still be realized.

## NOTES

This talk was invited by the I Encontro de Psicologia Humanista do Interior Paulista in Campinas, Brazil. 16-18 April 1999.

The event was a good example of institutionalized Humanistic Psychology being irrelevant to the goals of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century humanists. First, it was organized by the necessities of the organizers to earn a living, not a grander social necessity. Second, the presenters were not paid for their service, proceeds being distributed between the organizers. Finally, when questions, observations and discussion was solicited from participants, the organizers advised presenters that it was a company rule that microphones could not be given to "members of the audience" because it "caused a lot of confusion" and "nobody wants to hear them anyway."