

WHAT DOES IT HAVE TO DO WITH CLIENT-CENTERED THERAPY?

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It is obvious that many significant endeavors have nothing whatever to do with client-centered therapy. There are also activities that are extremely valuable and cannot be called client-centered therapy but nevertheless contain the mark of the person-centered approach. One example is the connection between living well in a place and client-centered therapy. I will try to make this connection—that is, the similarities in values, attitudes, motives—apparent in this article.

The task is not new. Indeed, every occurrence of the person-centered approach has had to face this challenge. Before client-centered therapy had itself become the standard measure, people asked, what does this upstart non-directive therapy have to do with treating mental illness or helping children adjust? Now client-centered therapy has passed from reliable theory, solid practice and measurable results to conventional dogma. When Rogers began experimenting with encounter groups, out of a deep conviction in their ability to improve human relations, his own wife thought he was acting recklessly, jeopardizing his reputation and ruining his career. What did this adventure have to do with client-centered therapy? Now, group encounter is an irreplaceable part of group therapy, family therapy, and the countless self-help cults. When he began working with large groups, most of his psychologist colleagues from Chicago, who had barely managed to swallow encounter groups by thinking of them as a form of therapy, now jumped ship. What did convening large numbers of people to haggle over smoking rules or the parceling of time have to do with client-centered therapy? To those whose quest was learning and creativity, everything. Honest confrontation between good-willed—not necessarily like-minded—people, seeking truly participative consensus in governing, respecting cultural differences and the constructive power of positive intention are all consistent with client-centered therapy. Therapy and significant learning in groups each involve sincere people who are trying to understand each other's reality, accepting each other's human rights and valuing self-expression. Both seek to realize human potential in every dimension. Today, large group discussions of this ilk form the basis of 'town-hall meetings' in municipalities, business, and education. Appealing to the emotional attraction, they are even featured on afternoon television.

In other words, the same *attitude* and *values* (the same approach to human relations), the same roots that sprouted the theory and practice of client-centered

therapy, also branched into these other endeavors. It is not that client-centered therapy is the parent of the encounter group child and the large group is the grandchild, community life being a great-grandchild. It is that all these activities are brothers and sisters whose parent is the person-centered approach. And they have the same intention: to realize human potential through personal relations, significant dialogue in large groups and active participation in real communities.

There is an intimate connection between realizing human potential and being a responsible and active member of a *real* community, in an actual place, contributing to preserving and improving the natural environment, natural and healthy food production, security, relevant education, the general quality of life. Indeed, the very first large group encounter that Rogers convened in 1974 had the intention 'to explore the social implications of the client-centered approach'.

Perhaps relating my own experience (although the reader may have his or her own to draw from), which spans many years of involvement with client-centered therapy, encounter groups, and large groups for sensible dialogue and creative learning, and now living and actively participating in a rural community, may help to illustrate one version of the pattern to which I am referring.

I began collaborating with Carl Rogers as he was beginning his interest in large group encounters. People constantly questioned the social relevance of client-centered therapy and small group encounter (which we had come to refer to as the client-centered approach): 'This is all very interesting, but how do you apply this approach in the real world?' I could see that essential learning way beyond therapy and social dialogue was being realized, then and there, in these groups. If one were patient, a firmer understanding of the relation to 'real life' might be found. I felt that the criticism was too early. Relax. Give it some more thought. Learn more. See what happens. At the same time I had to agree. In spite of our best efforts, what we were doing was, after all, rather pitiful in light of the enormous challenges we faced as a species. Couldn't the effective force of client-centered therapy be channeled more directly toward facilitating social justice and constructive growth?

Through the series of pioneer large group encounters during the 1970s we slowly began to realize that it could. Still, it was easier to experience than to articulate for widespread understanding. Rogers' 1979 book on personal power in which he tried to explain this phenomenon slipped into oblivion practically unnoticed. Perhaps because large group encounters, though often therapeutic, were clearly not effective as psychotherapy (Wood, 1997). Nevertheless, they had enormous value in fostering consensual governance, creative problem solving and dealing constructively with actual crises that arose in the group. It is not so much that the crisis contains its own solution. It is that a crisis is an enzyme for actualizing its solution by the group. The development of intuitive faculties was also a significant learning that was available in these large group experiences. The value of these encounters with very low structure was not in learning interventions that could be taken back home to change one's community or taken to Austria

to bring peace to Central America. It was in experiencing how human potential is released in day-to-day real life situations. It was in learning about our basic human nature—for better or for worse—when we are grouped.

Why were these experiences so often called 'community'? For one thing, because people lived together, loved and fought, celebrated and grieved, worked out the values that governed their endeavors in sort of town meetings, overcame crises, invented appropriate rituals, and at times, reached what, for lack of greater clarity and articulation on my part, could be called an elevated state of wisdom. Perhaps a collective wisdom: a sensation of experiencing the unity of the group through the diversity of its particular members.

Does a group have an identity? Is it a thing in itself? The US Supreme Court said yes. Chief Justice John Marshall wrote in 1819 that corporations have properties of existence, 'Among the most important are immortality, and, if the expression may be allowed, individuality; properties, by which a perpetual succession of many persons are considered as the same, and may act as a single individual.' The court over the years has acted on this ruling by, for example, finding that a company (acting as a single individual as it were) was guilty of racial discrimination based on its history of hiring. Nevertheless, many people continue to insist that the group is nothing more than an assembly of individuals with no collective will.

Even if it is a thing in itself, does this make it a community? Many people do not think so. It lacks the resignation, the long-term commitments, the loyalties, the involvement, the day-in and day-out realities of real communities. Both opinions had some merit. These groups were and were not community. They were perhaps the cultivation of community. And they depended heavily on the place where they were convened. This is not a trivial observation. Rogers had always felt his facilitative conditions were essential and paid little attention to place. He felt he could do psychotherapy anywhere. Of course, he could conduct client-centered therapy in Tokyo or Amsterdam, even sitting on a park bench in a quiet wood. But not on the A-train at rush hour, or in the middle of the Rolling Stones' 'Goodbye Concert' in Yankee Stadium, or underwater in diving gear. The place must be 'receptive' to the activity. Ideally, it would itself be therapeutic. Rogers was able to ignore place because it was, in fact, always carefully *controlled*: a quiet, dimly lit room without distractions.

In studying large groups it is clear that though necessary none of the well-known personal conditions are sufficient. Much more influential in the group outcome is ambience: the place, the geographical, spatial location, and the composition or particularity of the people gathered together at a particular time. Time, location, people. More than anything else, I believe that ignoring these factors is what has made large groups gatherings in recent years, though stimulating to the uninitiated, not merely banal but largely irrelevant in terms of significant learning. Large groups have become an endangered natural resource.

Even when attention was paid to the environment, group composition,

relevant discourse, the group may have become an effective learning experience, but it did not fully become a community. It was still somewhat of an abstraction. Where was the village, the town hall, schools, hospitals, commercial enterprises, the legal institutions? It was a community without a place.

My effort to learn to live well in a place began after having worked for several years in Brazil. In 1984, I accepted a post as full professor in the graduate school of clinical psychology at a major Brazilian university. At the same time I began living on a citrus farm not too far from the campus. Although teaching psychology could not hold my interest, becoming the *locum tenens*, the keeper of this place in rural Brazil, did.

At first, my wife and I concentrated on preserving the native vegetation and wildlife in our watershed, while slowly but deliberately changing our farming methods from conventional to natural agriculture. The work was straightforward, local, tiring and rewarding.

We began to see that *we* did not really take care of the land. We were a part of the land, the *conscious part of the ecosystem taking care of itself*. We extended the consciousness of *Jequitibá* and its rustling leaves, of the *lambarí* in their scurrying schools, of the hawk in its tense glide, of *onça preta* in its silent stalking, of *feijão guandú* gathering nitrogen in its roots, of the lemon fattening in the sun, of the milk thistle concocting its bitter cure, of golden corn in bright green sheaths, of the restless muddied river, the crystal springs and the humid air. Most of all we championed the living earth, the *humus* from which *humans* descended.

To seal the commitment to the natural environment this perception implied, we registered the 84 hectare watershed as an official ecological reserve—held in perpetuity for all future generations—to preserve and restore the biodiversity and beauty of a vestige of the great Brazilian coastal rainforest, the *Mata Atlântica*. As growing healthy food is not only noble but absolutely necessary for human survival, in the transition zones surrounding the protected forest, we practice natural agriculture, free from chemical insecticides, herbicides and fertilizers. We are certified organic growers and produce food for our own needs and for the region. We try to support the local economy, work to improve sanitation and schooling in our village, to promote social justice and to preserve the more constructive agrarian values: self-reliance, honesty, loyalty, fair employment, just social conditions, and good neighborliness.

No waste is exported from our property. Water is held in the land and cleansed by the forests. We aim for sustainable housing. Using *taipa*—that is earth walls—in new construction. Using natural and recycled building materials, solar energy, recycled waste water, preserving rain water. We are fostering environmental education, learning by doing, learning by direct experience as well as through carefully designed scientific experiments researching biodiversity, flora, fauna, soil preservation and restoration. This is almost completely opposite to industrial agriculture.

Industrial agriculture is capitalism's tool in globalization. What is wrong with globalization, after all it brought us the Internet? The farmer and poet

Wendell Berry, writing in the *New York Times* (9 February 2003) tells us: 'After World War II, we hoped the world might be united for the sake of peacemaking. Now the world is being "globalized" for the sake of trade and the so-called free market—for the sake, that is, of plundering the world for cheap labor, cheap energy, and cheap materials. How nations, let alone regions and communities, are to shape and protect themselves within this global economy is far from clear.' Our small regional effort is not merely a reaction to the worst in globalization, it is a viable alternative.

My wife, Lucila is an artist and art helps to guide our work—not so much in the production of things, but as a way of sensing and following the esthetic sense of a decent forest, decent agriculture and decent housing.

From our direct contact with the land, we have also become aware of the tremendous social implications in family-centered natural farming. In Latin America the trend toward misery is evident and well documented. The process goes like this: small families, trying to produce food using the methods of industrial agriculture cannot compete with the subsidized giant multinationals. They are therefore 'forced' off the land. Arriving in the densely populated urban centers they have difficulty finding work. Shelter is often just that, a corner under a bridge to keep dry. Since they must buy food, they are now 'food dependent'. Without money, this leads directly to misery and hunger. Producing more food (since there is already an abundance in the world) does not resolve hunger. Integrating natural farming methods for families to remain on the land, along with conservation of native vegetation and wetlands helps to resolve both social misery and protection of the environment for future generations. We are employing people and forming partnerships with those who are being dismissed by industrial farms. Thus, those who wish may stay on the land, applying their practical knowledge and not fall into the urban misery that characterizes countries exploited by the new industrial capitalism of globalization.

For me no further explanation is necessary. However, for those who might want to hear more about psychology, I can say a bit more. First of all, nature erases self-deception. Think about it: when you are alone in the woods there is no reason to be anything other than yourself. Also, one may note that accomplishing such social changes directly increases human potential, human dialogue between cultures and classes is fostered, individuals and groups become more consciously aware, perception is augmented and with it the phenomenon of the natural world grows. All of one's capacities are called on and, like muscles that are worked, grow with use. Not a day passes that I am not a scientist, resolving some technical problem in our watershed infrastructure or in the local municipality. I even consult on high-tech problems involved with using satellite images to map soil use and water conservation. Not a day passes that I am not a psychologist, working with neighbors on perceptions of our reserve, with the politicians in the municipality on domestic waste recycling programs, sanitation systems and conservation of pluvial waters. The technical solutions are simple.

Reaching consensus among merchants, realtors, politicians and citizen groups is a matter of psychology. Although I prefer to think of myself as a concerned citizen trying to do what is right, one could say that I have adopted a particular way of being a psychologist.

A final word. In this place at this time, our real work remains the preserving of the biological diversity of our small watershed. Reforesting with native trees areas of the ecosystem which have been degraded by failed agricultural projects and, where possible, allowing nature to do the important reforestation. In the transition areas where we practice natural agriculture we have cut runoff-retaining ditches following the curve of the land to prevent soil erosion.

Our citrus orchards are completely free of chemical fertilizers, synthetic pesticides and herbicides. Also, we rotate corn, oats, wheat and legumes. The corn and wheat are sold to a neighbor who has free-range chickens (that need organic feed). They lay fertilized eggs that are marketed regionally.

The social implications of farming may also be realized through cooperation between neighbors. For example, together with this neighbor and another organic farmer on the other side of the valley we are buying a cold press. We will plant sunflowers and extract the oil. Only what the droves of roving parrots pilfer is lost. The oil is sold for cooking (and can also be used to power our traction) and the residue is high in protein and ideal for supplementing the chicken feed.

We did not begin with the intention of forming a cooperative (which surely would have ended badly). My neighbor merely said he needed organic corn and could only find it a few hundred kilometers away in Paraná. I said, 'I have a field in which I could plant corn.' 'Fine, let's do it.' This neighbor grows tomatoes, lettuce, mushrooms, celery, carrots, potatoes, bananas, besides their specialty—eggs. We buy almost all of our food from them. We grow some ourselves, of course. And the other neighbor who also supplies our dairy products and sells our oranges and lemons in the local street markets said one day, 'Why don't we plant sunflowers and extract the oil from their seeds?'

Thus, it is possible to understand how realizing human potential—individually, in consort with others seeking to better themselves, or in living well in a place—when approached with a certain straightforwardness, consistency, honesty and integrity—is consistent with the expression of the person-centered approach.

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