

Title: Person-Centred Counselling: Therapeutic and Spiritual Dimensions

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Publisher: Whurr

ISBN: 1-870332-87-3

Reviewer: Aine Campbell

I have been attracted to person-centred counselling since my first encounter with the writings of Carl Rogers more than 15 years ago. When I read “On Becoming a Person” I experienced it as a coming home. His views on the healing potential of a relationship offering the core therapeutic conditions of unconditional positive regard, genuineness and empathic understanding resonated strongly with thoughts and feelings of which I was dimly aware. I was also struck by the parallels with the Christian vision of enhancing relationships.

Brian Thorne describes himself as having been nourished by two different communities of faith: person-centred practitioners and theoreticians and the Christian Church and its theologians. In reading this book I was interested to see how the author integrates the values of both perspectives and confronts the contradictions in his therapeutic approach.

The book draws together chapters, articles and lectures from a twelve-year period of his professional life. It is arranged in four parts. The first and most engaging is autobiographical, tracing the experiences and influences which led him to become a therapist. In the first chapter the author recalls his recognition at an early age of a capacity to empathize. He attributes this to growing up in war-time Britain, a time of extraordinary intimacy and intensity. “I learned from an early age to live with the deepest human emotions of love and fear and to witness the extreme limits of human courage and vulnerability, of hope and despair.” An only child, he was much loved by both family and neighbours. The spiritual event, which shaped his life, occurred at the age of nine and is recounted in the second chapter “The God who comes”. This happened on a Good Friday afternoon and he attributes it in part to his empathic ability. He describes it as “the almost unbearable experience of glimpsing the nature of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ”. The important outcome was an enduring sense of being loved “beyond all the possible limits of my imagining” which is the basis of his deep acceptance of both himself and others. This experience revealed to him an essential truth. He, together with all humanity, is infinitely desirable to God. This is despite his own frequent experience of himself as undesirable. His conviction is that negative self-judgments and lack of self-worth conceal us from this truth.

Thorne was twenty-eight before he started full-time training as a person-centred counsellor, having first embarked on a teaching career. The work of Carl Rogers was his chief source of inspiration. His description of core therapeutic conditions gave shape to what had previously been an instinctive response to others in need and also helped to move Thorne towards greater self-acceptance. At the time he was suffering from feelings of guilt and impotence after the death of his mother and the suicide of a former student.

The section which follows is the longest and presents his theoretical understanding of the person-centred approach. This is illustrated by descriptions of key therapeutic relationships in which he was involved. The chapter entitled “Person-centred Therapy” gives a comprehensive account of theory and practice. The basic assumption is that people are

trustworthy and, given favourable conditions, will move towards the accomplishment of their inherent potential. Behaviour is not just a response to what happens to us but depends crucially on how we perceive ourselves, our self-concept. Due to our innate need for approval, this is often the result of internalized “conditions of worth” imposed on us by significant others. This conceals us from our own organismic experience which is trustworthy and prompts us in the direction of growth. This is the central thesis of the person-centred approach and the aim of therapy is to provide the facilitative psychological climate. The core conditions of this climate are discussed in depth, emphasizing that this is not about a repertoire of skills but developing a way of being. The counsellor-client relationship is at the heart of the process and this depends on the relationship of the counsellor with him/herself. The approach is very demanding on the therapist since it requires a commitment to continuing development of the self to achieve a deep level of self-acceptance. The counsellor cannot expect the client to go further than he/she has journeyed. This message resounds throughout the book.

The contribution of which the author is most proud is the description of the quality of tenderness, the text of a lecture given in 1982. Three years later Carl Rogers, shortly before his death, recorded his observation of a similar transcendental quality in a growth-promoting relationship which he called presence. Thorne’s experience is that tenderness emerges when a relationship is characterized by acceptance, empathy and congruence and a deep trust in the client’s ability to move forward. The therapist is deeply in touch with his/her inner intuitive self, including the unknown and reaching out and touching the inner spirit of the client. There is an altered state of consciousness of the relationship including an awareness of being caught up in something larger. Thorne describes this as being caught up in a stream of love. This is accompanied by effortless understanding, profound growth, energy and healing.

“When tenderness is present there is the possibility of finding wholeness and releasing the liberating paradox.” The concept of the “liberating paradox” is the key to self-acceptance. According to Thorne, we remain trapped by paradoxical aspects of ourselves, because we experience them as contradictions, e.g., love/hate, strength/weakness, either/or. This results in paralysis and stuckness. For example, one can love one’s mother but hate her also, so one can neither rebel nor conform. To experience both poles and own them as complementary is liberating and releasing, freeing us from emotional prison.

The third section focuses on issues of value and meaning, reflecting on fundamental questions about human nature. Person-centred therapists are often caricatured as value-free empathizers with no strong views on anything. Thorne challenges this fallacy, arguing that there is a strong ethical and moral stance inherent in person-centred therapy. In exploring this, he also addresses issues more often encountered in the context of Christian teaching. He frequently encounters clients struggling with the challenge of finding value and meaning, a key task in the search for identity. His clinical experience suggests that the secular values of contemporary society leave many “adrift on an ocean of limitless relativity”.

How is this relevant to counselling practice? Thorne argues that attention to conscience is the key. Conscience is often presented in secular counselling literature as the harbinger of guilt and the enemy of growth. Thorne disagrees. True conscience is the faculty which enables us to keep in touch with the meaning of our lives and guides our actions in pursuit of this. Failure to listen to its promptings results in guilt – a profound dissatisfaction with not living and acting in accordance with our own potential and meaning. Such guilt is appropriate and useful and should be recognized as such by therapists. Conversely, inappropriate guilt conceals from us our own meaning and must be challenged. This arises when we fail to live

up to how an external authority views how we should live and act. This can be significant others or institutions such as the Church or government, although it is also possible that these speak the same message as true conscience.

The therapeutic context enables the client to attend to true conscience and move forward. Thorne's frequent experience is that the client's forward movement often encounters a hurdle where inappropriate guilt reasserts itself and the client regresses to self-rejection. Roger's view of honouring the client's freedom to choose is that this includes accepting such self-rejection. Thorne strongly disagrees and advocates "ethical confrontation" when this occurs. He expresses the controversial view that congruence requires us to give expression to cherished values and truths when the moment demands. For him, one such moment is when he is in distress at witnessing a client's self-betrayal. The challenge is to respond in a way that avoids moralizing on the one hand and empty permissiveness on the other.

Thorne is at his most provocative in the final chapters. These are texts of special lectures given to diverse audiences in counselling, church and academic settings. He uses these occasions to challenge conventional wisdom in theological, political and social arenas. The traditional teaching of Christian Churches has often been damaging. For example, the doctrine of original sin promotes a view of human nature as essentially corrupt. This feeds feelings of deep self-rejection to which Carl Rogers himself was prone until middle age. The contrasting view of original righteousness, that mankind is created in God's image and likeness, asserts our divine potential and infinite desirability. Thorne also takes Christian teaching to task for promoting the message that sexuality is an impediment to a relationship with God. This is associated with a strong anti-woman bias. The effect is that the body is degraded to be exploited by advertisers and pornographers. Thorne calls on Christians to redeem the body, acknowledge the God-giveness of sexuality and insist on the fundamental equality of the sexes.

This is a very powerful book. It is not a source of practical information but of insight. It is thought-provoking, challenging and inspiring. The author strives uncompromisingly to distill some core truths, drawing on a wealth of experience from both his personal and professional life. An irritating note is when he speculates on the direction Rogers might have taken if his early experience of religion had not been negative.

The book is relevant to a wide readership. It is essential reading for counselling practitioners, to deepen their understanding of human nature and the potential of the therapeutic relationship. I would recommend it to anyone confronting questions of meaning and purpose in life and authentic living. It also has much to say to theologians and those in Christian ministry about how to facilitate a relationship with God.

For myself, this book left me feeling affirmed in my personal knowledge. As Thorne writes of Carl Rogers:

He gave me the courage to discover what I already knew. . . . and endowed my own experience with authority.

