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How much *can* I render unto Caesar? (without becoming Caesar)

Clive Perraton Mountford

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When Carl Rogers moved from the University of Wisconsin to La Jolla in the early 1960s he may have been doing himself a favour, but he was certainly doing none for person-centered counselling. His withdrawal from the academy helped ensure the person-centered approach would cease being taught at American (and Canadian) institutions and pretty much disappear as an orientation in USA (and Canada). European therapists and trainers remained within their academic institutions, embedded the approach, and ensured that it is Europe where person-centered counselling now thrives.

What if we are fools?

Such is the current wisdom[1], but I find myself puzzling over complexities. I have twice been enrolled in teacher training programs in Canada, with a 20 year gap between them, and both programs were clearly influenced by person-centered ideas and practice. I find little such influence in England. My wife is currently working as a counsellor in Yukon, and although her colleagues hardly know what "person-centered" means, there seems little doubt that their work involves offering core conditional relationship. Here in England, where person-centered counsellor training programs abound, there is also little doubt that many programs are not operating in a person-centered way and so cannot really be training person-centered counsellors. Yet I had to move here to receive person-centered training.

As I say, complexities. Therefore, I am wondering—and that's not rhetorical, I really am wondering—whether Carl Rogers was aware of facts his European legatees have discounted. For example:

1. If a corrupted tradition lives on in the name of what it once was, then the influence it has upon the world around it becomes corrupt and corrupting.

2. If a way of thinking and being refuses to become corrupted, and pulls away from the institutions and pressures which would corrupt it, then it may be more able to authentically influence the world around it.

3. The person-centered tradition is *so* countercultural that it cannot survive within our current cultural institutions: it will and must be either destroyed or corrupted and distorted by them. Compromise is not possible.

If these *are* the case, then maybe Carl Rogers got it right and it was the Europeans who got it wrong. Shortly after retiring from Strathclyde, Dave Mearns gave the 99th Associates Lecture at the University of East Anglia, and I understood him to be asking if he had been a fool for trying to compromise with institution-centered institutions. What if the answer is *Yes*?

A serious incompatibility

Two things need clarifying. First, this article is not another Mearns-bashing exercise. I have the greatest respect for Dave and his contributions to counselling, and if he got it wrong then I, too, am in deep trouble: I have spent the better part of my life in serial attempts at countercultural existence within institutions. Second, I am no zealot seeking return to a mythical client-centered past. My own practice is focusing oriented and I'm interested in learning from anyone and everyone with something useful to teach me about counselling.

What I am *not* interested in learning—or more precisely *acquiring*—but which I do try to cultivate an awareness of, are ways of being and relating that *contradict* person-centered relating. Person-centered relationship is difficult to achieve, vulnerable to corrosion, and it needs guarding with care. If I guard it *too* anxiously then there *is* a danger of zealotry, but if I do not guard it well enough then something infinitely precious begins to seep away. My guess is that Carl Rogers was so influential, and has come to be equated with a body of theory and practice much of which was developed by other people, because he embodied and made real the possibility of such relationship in a particularly pure and dependable form.

So what is so different about this kind of relationship? For sure, I must relate to you phenomenologically—I must seek to understand and know things *as if* I occupied your locus of awareness (I'm going to call this "point 1")—but that is not enough. I'm sure someone has already pointed out that a skilled torturer empathically understands their victim. What needs adding is a very deep desire that you *should be you* and should thrive ("point 2")—a joyful celebrating of *you*—and (in the language of the philosopher Immanuel Kant) an utter unwillingness to *use you* as a means to *my* ends and purposes.

How countercultural is that? How many interactions with others do we have in the course of a day which do *not* involve being *talked at* or *talking*

at, which do *not* involve one person managing and manipulating another, or *come down* to one person using someone else as a means to an end? If we all really tried to avoid such things then the world we know really would stop: hierarchy as we experience it would become impossible, commerce as we know it would become impossible, and "management" and "governance" would mostly be revealed as abusive systems of manipulation and bullying piggybacked upon fear.

If this sounds extreme, then try imagining your place of work, your professional body, for-profit commercial enterprise, or even the government trying to operate on the basis of the kind of relationship and respect for persons which is the hallmark of the person-centered tradition.

Why do they do it?

One reason people do try to manage and manipulate each other, and one reason hierarchies abound, is that so many folk believe they are doing other people a favour bossing them around and structuring their lives. They don't think that if you provide a relatively acceptant and secure social environment, and encourage human beings from infancy to get on with living and making their own choices, then they will all tend to thrive, and most of them will turn out to be highly social and fairly trustworthy. By contrast, person-centered relationship grounds in a deep and unshakable conviction that this, in outline, is demonstrably the case. (Yes, the story *is* more complex than this, and some children do require more facilitative intervention as they grow than others, but the overall structure is right.) Thus person-centered relationship respects individual choice and autonomy, eschews coercion, and seeks to be non-authoritative ("point 3"). What is more, those of us who take such relationship seriously think it is not just reserved for the therapy room, it is the best way for human beings to relate to each other in all circumstances. Period.

I cannot think of any situation or environment outside of small groups of colleagues where I'm going to experience such relating. Even the "person-centered" training program I seek to facilitate cannot offer so much. *Why?* Well, that takes me back to institutions and corruption, but first I want to make a small detour.

Critics object that this kind of talk of respect for individual choice and autonomy is very "western", possibly even "American-inspired", and certainly culturally-specific. I think they are missing a big point. It is *only* individuals who are *loci of awareness and experience*. Even in a culture that maintains, for example, that group decision-making is best and individuals should go along with group decisions, each person still chooses how to relate to that culture: wholeheartedly committing to the group and

its decisions, playing along with the group and harbour incongruent resentments, manipulating to subvert the group…or following some other path. The "organismic valuing process"[2] as Carl Rogers called it is central to action and awareness, and it is *inalienable* whatever the social context. For sure, an individual can be so *unaware* as to not even recognize that there *is* a choice being tacitly made, but that isn't cultural difference, that is dissociation.

Fallibility or something innately wrong?

I don't know whether it is logically or empirically necessary, or just ubiquitous practice, but wherever there is hierarchy and managed institutional life, there is also a whole lot of deception and dishonest relating. It is certainly *easier* to use others as a means to one's own ends if one is less than transparent, and what is often called "politics" would be *impossible without* deception and dishonesty, but is all this essential? At first, the question may seem something we do not need to worry about because, necessary or not, deception and dishonest relating directly contradict the person-centered demand for open, honest interaction. (I shall call this demand "point 4".) That now makes a minimum of four incompatibilities (points 1 through 4) standing between institutional culture and person-centered practice and theory. Isn't that enough to justify retreat from institutional life?

The answer is "Not really" because it *does* matter whether these dissonances are somehow *necessary* or just *contingent* upon a widespread corruption of the potential for institutions and even hierarchy to foster worthwhile human activity and relationship. That, I suppose, is the possibility which keeps so many of us struggling to ameliorate and perhaps even reform them. So I loop back to a version of the question I started with: Is amelioration and reform a realistic possibility—are problematic institutions "merely" fallible—or is there something about the very nature of managed, hierarchical institutions which is inconsistent with person-centered relating?

Hierarchy: a common problem

I cannot picture hierarchy without paternalism. Thus I cannot imagine a hierarchy which is *not* in conflict with the trusting and non-authoritative side of person-centered relationship (point 3 above). I *can* imagine a non-hierarchical college or university, but given how UK colleges and universities are intertwined with government and with profit-maximizing models of activity and distribution, I *cannot* imagine *how* such an institution might come about. Thus those of us teaching person-centered

practice within a college or university must accept—at best—a "tension" in the relationship with our institution.

This is probably something one can live with if the institution conceptualizes its job description as providing, in part, a home for critical and dissonant voices. Such an institution, however, is going to need a measure of security and confidence which many lack, and it is going to need a degree of freedom from government interference which is alien to contemporary education in Britain. Rather than recognizing the value of critical and dissonant voices, it is more likely that an institution's officers will seek to bring "dissidents" around to a more acceptable point of view, and its paternalistic (and maternalistic) managers will do what it takes to achieve their end. Resisting all of this is corrosive—and, for me, it promises to be eventually corrupting—of the person-centered way of being which anyone teaching person-centered practice must necessarily place at the heart of all relationship.

So why would a person accept the risks inherent in all this? I have done so because I *don't* want the North American experience repeated here. But for how long can I remain a buffer between a relatively person-centered training program and a deeply incompatible institution: what is the realistic lifespan of an authentically person-centered trainer in the average British college? And as I do become increasingly corroded and eventually corrupted by what I must negotiate and compromise with, what am I really teaching? Being a person-centered trainer in Britain promises to be a bit like being an inner-city cop or a teacher in "difficult" schools: expect burn out within the decade.

I began this section with the claim that hierarchy and the non-authoritative side of person-centered relationship conflict. My experience is that pretty much everything else, and certainly the other numbered points of conflict, devolve from this original conflict. I have been told by feminist friends that feminism's real issue is hierarchy, and maybe that is why they are my friends: we share a problem in common.

He who pays the piper…

Finally—and if you are now blessing your guiding stars that you are neither a person-centered practitioner nor a counsellor trainer—I want to make two concluding observations.

First, the way of being and the kind of relationship which I am calling "person-centered" is becoming ubiquitous across counselling and psychotherapy. Most of us, whatever flavour therapy we offer, recognize the need to begin and end with the kind of relationship Carl Rogers became famous for. If that sort of relationship really *is* as important as

most of us believe, then it really *does* need to be taught to counselling trainees, and it really *does* need to be lived by therapists. In which case, the academy is a high risk environment for any of us.

Second, it is not only the academy which is high risk. The government is now putting money into the provision of talking therapies and we are all invited to the party…with the proviso that we retrain. BACP is encouraging us to take advantage of this, but I remain unfashionably skeptical[3]. Unless I'm mistaken, the retraining involves learning non-phenomenological ways of relating to clients. As I know of no way to switch comfortably, congruently, and without causing client confusion between a phenomenologically grounded and an objectifying relationship, then those of us who really are committed to person-centered—hence phenomenologically grounded—relationship are again being asked to corrupt our approach.

There is good money on offer, of course, and that is what I have somehow avoided talking about. The recompense for embracing what I am critiquing is a middle-class salary, and the cost of "purity" is not just a possibly vanishing person-centered tradition but professional and financial hardship. By the time that he walked away from the University of Wisconsin, Carl Rogers didn't have to worry about the latter. Maybe he was just exercising his hard-banked freedom to demonstrate that he had some other important things figured out too.

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[1] For example: Howard Kirschenbaum (2007) *The Life and Work of Carl Rogers*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books, and Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne (2007) *Person-Centered Counselling In Action* third edition. London: Sage.

[2] Carl Rogers (1959) "A Theory Of Therapy, Personality, And Interpersonal Relationships As Developed In The Client-Centred Framework" in S. Koch ed. (1959) *Psychology: A Study of a Science* vol.3. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

[3] "Bringing up IAPT" in *therapy today* March 2008-vol 19 no 2.