

# A Pilgrim at Candle Creek Falls

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## **Clearwater Valley, British Columbia, Canada, VOE 1N0**

It is spring in the Clearwater Valley. The view from where I am writing this is so lovely that it reminds me of the advice once given to young ladies crossing the Lake District. It was suggested that they draw the curtains across the coach windows because the sights were too troubling. The sights here tear at a person used to urban living: used to, and needing, layers of protection.

Three days ago I revisited Candle Creek Falls which, fittingly enough, looked like hardened candle wax when I last saw them in January. Now they were a tumble of melt water, and the cedar trees which veiled them were a subtly different shade of green. I felt excited. I thought I was joyful, but denial and distortion are never to be underestimated. As I gazed up at the Falls, I became aware—in quick succession—of all the busyness in my head, of things swimming beneath the busyness, of a kind of heaving deep inside me, and then I realized that a racked voice was repeating "What have they done to you?" Tears poured down my cheeks, and I sensed my face distorting. For several minutes it seemed I would be torn apart as I experienced the depth of my incongruence and the feelings I had been ignoring.

*Okay*, I eventually asked, *what are you feeling?*, and the answer was an almost unspeakable pain and sorrow. *What for?* I inquired. I hesitated, knowing that it wasn't just for the clear-cut chunks missing from the forest which make flying home across western Canada rather like studying a dog with mange, knowing that this wasn't just about all the damage done to the lands I love. Then the layered protections really pulled apart, and I knew that I was weeping for whatever, whoever, was beside and with me at Candle Creek Falls.

*Does that make sense?* I am not sure that it makes sense to me because I find no satisfactory way to conceptualize the awareness of presence which is so strong in these hills and mountains. I have tried to rationalize this kind of experience, and I have tried to tell myself that I simply love mountains and a certain kind of beauty, but that doesn't quite answer. Somehow, the experience is about more than mountains and more than beauty, or rather, they are part of something more than themselves...as I am. At least, that is how it seems at times like this, and—of crucial importance—the "something more" is badly wounded and grotesquely abused.

As I hauled my increasingly sedentary self back up the trail, I discovered that what had happened was helping to answer questions I have been putting to myself over the past few weeks and lending various matters a perspective such that they at least seem to belong together. Since finding myself with a chapter in a book entitled *Counselling and Spirituality* (Moore 2006) I have been much exercised. Am I a fraud? I often don't believe that I really know what spirituality is, and I frequently find myself confused when others speak of it. Even worse, my contribution to the book is an extension of an argument properly belonging to environmental ethics. *What is it doing in a compendium of articles about counselling and spirituality?*

Sitting here, today, watching clouds move up the valley, and buds almost visibly opening (they are certainly more leaf-like than when I got up this morning) I feel that maybe it does all make sense, and maybe I am not a fraud, and maybe I do have something to say about a possible relationship between Candle Creek Falls and person-centered practice. I want to try to spell it out as simply and clearly as I know how right now in a way that is primarily intended for other person-centered practitioners.

## **A Beautiful Family Home**

Here is a place to start. Suppose that you and I belong to a large, extended family which has inherited a beautiful old house. Let's say that house is situated here in the Clearwater Valley where a person without substantial shelter isn't going to last very long in winter. I decide that our house needs some remodelling, and I soon get busy with my tools, but you don't like the changes I am making. You protest; you have pretty good grounds for protest because it is your house, too; however you cannot go so far as accusing me of *destroying* the house. It is just that I want it modernised, and you like things the way they were. Then you get up one morning to find me perched on the roof chopping a large hole through it, and the next day I'm hammering down an outside wall. There is no doubt now: I *am* wrecking the house, and our whole family is going to be in trouble if I am not stopped.

There are a lot of people who claim that the way humankind is treating the planet is akin to someone chopping a hole in the roof of our family home. There are also those who think that what is happening is simply non-lethal change which some folks just don't like. *Who is right?* Nobody knows for sure, but I think that the best course of action is pretty much the same in either case. Physical intervention aside, broadly two things can be *said* to the person who is wrecking the house, and they both lead to the same place. Those two things are:

- This is not *sensible* behaviour. Self (or species) interest says: *Don't do that!* This *is* our only home, and we are quite vulnerable creatures. The weather doesn't have to get very cold or very warm before humans cease to function; we need a particular blend of gases in the atmosphere; we need sunlight, but it has to be filtered, and so on. Humankind fits a particular Earth environment, and we shall be in big trouble if that environment changes very much.
- Earth and what some call "the created order" are important and of value simply in themselves. The way that we are treating Earth is plain wrong...morally wrong even.

The first response characterizes just about everything now being said in the press, and on radio and television, about "climate change" and "the environment". We are routinely enjoined to change our ways because our well-being depends upon it. Earth is portrayed as a means to an end which, roughly speaking, is human flourishing.

However—and with heavy irony *unfortunately*—this kind of strategy isn't going to work. There is no evidence that we humans are currently *capable* of acting in our own best interests environmentally speaking. We want wealth, economic growth, knowledge, as many toys as possible; we want them now. We sail as close to the wind as we think we can; we take risks. My hunch is that we are wired that way; speaking for myself, I delight in risks which make no rational sense.

To make matters even worse, the calculations that would be involved in trying to figure out what is safe behaviour and what we can get away with are beyond human competence in practice and probably in theory. We often don't know what consequences small changes and seemingly innocuous activities might have, and that is not just remediable ignorance. Complex, chaotic systems are involved, and it may be that they cannot be accurately modelled.

*What do we do?* Speaking as a part-time moral philosopher, the answer is staring us in the face. We need to protect Earth from our own folly and our potential to abuse, we need to play it *really* safe, and that is just the kind of job which morality seems designed to do. If we stand back temporarily from our own particular moral beliefs and commitments and ask what human morality would *need to be like to best promote human welfare* in a populous and high technology culture, then I think the answer is pretty clear. Morality will need to promote a caring and protective relationship with Earth such that Earth is treated as an end in itself and not simply as a means to satisfying our material ambitions or distracting us from our pain. What we *need* is an Earth-friendly morality. What we must *do* is develop and seek to follow such a morality.

This sketch—and believe me, it is just a sketch—invokes a tactic which is philosophically sound even if it is not always smiled upon. More importantly, perhaps, my proposal is consistent with the broadly held belief that morality's *raison d'être* is human welfare, and it meets the reasonable concerns of those who believe we must protect Earth for the sake of human interests.

About here I am sometimes told what a bloodless, even cynical way this is to argue about our beloved family home. I feel particularly vulnerable to that charge right now given the kind of things I was saying earlier about my experiences here in the Clearwater Valley. I also feel exposed to the riposte that this talk of morality is beside the point when what is really needed is that we each find a different, more caring way of relating to Earth and the "something more" and I also wrote about earlier. I guess the short answer is that morality is for when things go wrong. If love and caring are abundant then we hardly need morality at all. Morality is for the lean times, for the times when understanding and compassion fail, and it is also a practice which can lead us back towards those qualities. My sense is that we are living in lean times.

The long answer? That is coming next, but I promise that it won't be *too* long.

## **The Next Step**

Believe it or not, the detailed version of this took me nearly 10 years to produce and eventually get accepted as a doctoral thesis. Some fancy conceptualization and terminology got developed along the way which, if you are interested, gets a brief airing in the chapter in *Spirituality and Counselling* (Mountford 2006a) and in a recent article in *Self and Society* (Mountford 2006b). However, I am not sure that stuff is necessary here. What is important is that it was around this time that I petitioned for one of my periodic divorces from philosophy and took up with person-centered counselling.

There were many reasons for this change of partner, not least being my recognition that I didn't know where to take my philosophical argument next. I had a pretty compelling case for something tantamount to Deep Ecology<sup>1</sup>, and—with a naïveté which I at least find touching—I viewed its development as a useful contribution to environmental sanity. In practice, however, it all seemed to stir up more hostility than converts, and I was painfully aware that my argument was incomplete.

I was claiming:

- It is in humankind's best interest to practice a morality that not only treats human beings as morally important and as ends in themselves

but extends this privilege to the whole of the nonhuman world or created order.

That alone is a pretty radical claim, but then I was adding:

- In order for this to happen, most of us are going to need a program of deep personal change. We are going to have to learn to relate to the nonhuman, to the created order and all of its parts, as something precious to be treasured and respected. Unfortunately, I don't really know how that is to be achieved.

End of the road. I was going to need a new way to continue my lifelong obsession with the fact that human beings have a distinct tendency to wreck their surroundings. I reasoned that if, as a species, we incline to behave much like a person chopping a hole in the roof of their only home and shelter, then, as a species, we are disturbingly similar to a crazy person. What I needed to do, therefore, was train as a therapist and possibly practice as a therapist in order to learn more about that kind of craziness.

On the strength of this logic, and with the perhaps surprising blessing of my wife and daughters, we sold our family home and only shelter, and my wife and I moved to England to train as person-centered counsellors. Some might say that if I had wanted to know about crazy behaviour then all I needed was a full-length looking glass. I think they would be wrong, though, because I found that person-centered theory and practice points towards at least one way of facilitating the requisite personal change.

### **Dr. Rogers's Troika**

At the heart of person-centered practice is a way of being and a way of relating to others. I would even go so far as to say that the way of being, properly understood, *is* person-centered practice.

Positioned, as it were, on the right-hand of this central way of being is a basic recipe for acquiring and practicing it. Positioned on the left-hand is a theory about human nature and therapy which offers intellectual support for the recipe. The *recipe* consists of the famous list of six therapeutic conditions which Carl Rogers (1959) deemed "necessary and sufficient". The *theory* is a story about the innate human tendencies to grow and develop, to seek relationship, and to be affected by the expectations and conditions placed upon us by others. What goes wrong in human lives is that the love we receive—if such a thing can truly be called "love"—is all too often tainted by what we know as "conditions of worth", those ubiquitous *I will love you, if...* clauses which are so much a part of growing up and of everyday human relating. The antidote to this conditionality, and what heals the wounds which it inflicts, is the

experience of a relationship relatively free from conditionality and grounded in the necessary and sufficient conditions. Providing that relationship is a counsellor's main job.

As I review the outlines of Rogers's construction, I am yet again moved by its elegance and loveliness, and I feel myself drawn towards its architect just as I am drawn towards those trees outside. There is something very *right* about all this, something deeply trustworthy. I want to stress that because I am one of those who thinks the construction is also flawed.

There are different ways of thinking about this flaw. In a general sense, asserting *necessary and sufficient* conditions for therapeutic healing is just too strong. *Necessary and sufficient* means *if and only if*, and even hard science is leery of claims *that* strong. A useful hypothesis needs to be strong enough that it can be shown false—if not, it is scientifically valueless—it does not need to be so strong that it is almost *certain* to be false. This kind of thinking dates back to a dream of certainty which our intellectual culture has renounced. More specifically, as Campbell Purton (2002 and 2004) has so clearly argued, the necessary and sufficiency assertion depends upon the hypothesis that *all* psychic distress is rooted in introjections of conditional acceptance usually experienced in childhood, and this really doesn't seem to be the case. Campbell cites other common factors such as post-traumatic stress, lose-lose choices, bereavement, and childhood *deprivation* rather than *conditionality*...just days ago a student was telling me how their experience of therapy fit Campbell's argument.

In other words, there is a fallacy at the very centre of our theory. We can draw a veil over this embarrassment and carry on as if everything is fine. We can retreat to the halcyon days of the 1950s and call ourselves client-centered purists. We can seek "integration" with other theoretical partners in order to shore ourselves up. We can also note that the way of being *is* the heart of person-centered practice, acknowledge our theoretical difficulty, and carry on offering a person-centered *therapy* with confidence while giving thought to the need to revise person-centred *theory*. Obviously, my money is on the final option, but I find myself in the same predicament that I was in vis-à-vis environmental ethics a decade ago: *I don't really know how that is to be achieved*.

That small additional embarrassment notwithstanding, it does seem to me that there is nothing inherently *wrong* with the six conditions other than the assertion that they are necessary and sufficient. If we are willing to renounce the latter claim, then they remain a perfectly good recipe for acquiring, practicing, and teaching the way of being which is central to person-centered practice. I say this with conviction as someone who

strives to ground his therapeutic practice in the three core, or counsellor, conditions, and who bases his teaching of future person-centered counsellors on the acquisition of a core-conditional way of relating to others. I also say it with conviction because—conveniently for my environmental agenda—these conditions map beautifully onto a nonhuman locus of attention. In other words, it is possible to offer a version of the person-centered relationship to the nonhuman world and all of its parts.

Does that seem self-evident, obvious, and in no need of further demonstration? I know that other person-centered practitioners do hold similar views, and you may be someone who would prefer to jump ahead and skip the next section. Otherwise, here is a brief accounting in support of my claim.

### **A Very Catholic Recipe For Relationship**

I shall briefly consider each of the six conditions described by Carl Rogers, but not in their original order.

The unconditional positive regard, or UPR, the prizing or love which a therapist offers their client, maps onto trees, cats, mountains...without difficulty. It is easy to love a tree; sometimes, it is easier than loving human beings, I find.

Empathy, too, is not that difficult to extend to most living things. Cats have feelings, purposes, furry cat-shoes to step into. This may be called "anthropomorphizing", but it is a respectable ethological tactic these days. What is more, empathising with representatives of another species is not unique to human beings. The primatologist Frans de Waal (2005) has recently described how a female bonobo (think "pygmy chimpanzee"—a slimmer cousin of the chimps befriended by Jane Goodall) picked up a downed starling, climbed a tree in order to release the bird to its element, and, when the starling failed to escape the bonobo's enclosure, sat beside it for the rest of the day until the starling recovered sufficient strength to fly away.<sup>2</sup>

Trees may seem a bit harder to empathise with, but I think most gardeners know empathy for their floral friends. *Mountains?* Speaking personally, I feel things for mountains that are sometimes overwhelming—I do mean the mountains themselves and not the "something other" which I spoke of earlier—and the well-being of a beloved mountain is of great importance to me. I know I'm not alone, and I can even call recent developments in neuroscience to my aid. It seems the experience of empathy is associated with observable brain activity and a kind of neurological mirroring. For example, if I see you drop a big rock

on your foot, things will happen in parts of *my* brain that mirror what is happening in those parts of *your* brain. Not everything that is going on for you will be mirrored, that is why I don't literally feel your pain; what I will experience are the emotions, expectations, and other less direct feelings associated with a big rock landing on one's foot.

Some researchers even think that human brains have evolved areas dedicated to empathic identification. In other words, humans—and to a lesser degree several other kinds of mammal—are hardwired for empathy, and in humans the consequences of this are surprising. Brain scanning has demonstrated that "empathic activity" occurs when, for example, we observe a big rock dropping on a cow's hoof, or—wait for it!—we see a big rock rolling down a mountainside and slamming into another big rock. It seems that humans are not just wired for empathy; we are so *well* wired for empathy that we can empathize with inanimate objects.

This does not mean we cannot and should not sometimes employ the psychological "shields" which allow us to utilize objects for our own purposes—that would be absurd—and if this was a more philosophical discussion, I would have to ask hard questions about how such use sits with a more environmentally focused morality. My point, here, is simply that humans are innately empathic creatures and that our empathic ability is not limited to our own kind.

UPR, empathy...that's two out of the three *core* or *counsellor* conditions. The third one is that the therapist be congruent, or genuine and authentic, within the counselling relationship. Can genuineness and authenticity be offered to a nonhuman? With creatures enjoying a high degree of sentience I think the answer must be *Of course it can*. The case is harder to make when the other party to the relationship is not sentient; however, there are two stages to congruence to take into account. First, there is openness to one's own experiencing, a kind of inner honesty and acceptance. Second, there is congruent relating and being in the world. The first stage is about how one relates to one's self, and the second stage is about relating to others. Even if one cannot easily be said to be in congruent *relationship* with a mountain, one can be congruently *oneself* upon the mountain and act towards the mountain from a *place* of personal congruence. The more I reflect upon this, the more it seems potentially very important to the way we treat the nonhuman world: *How much damage is done in a state of incongruence?* Finally, let us not forget that the three counsellor conditions are *inseparable* in practice: one cannot be empathic and acceptant while holding back on congruence.

I am now going to turn the traditional account of the counsellor conditions on its head for a few paragraphs. Those conditions are intended to



contribute to a therapeutic environment for human beings. They are acquired and offered for the *sake* of the client, but—as person-centered practitioners know so well—they powerfully affect the person *offering* them. Speaking personally, I find that the consequent changes in me run in two directions. I am more acceptant, a little less ego-laden, gentler, more perceptive, more empathic, more desirous that whatever is gets its moment in the sun, its chance to flourish. I am also more angry, more enraged by the suffering and damage which humankind is causing to itself and everything around it. Both these tendencies, if generalized, will help safeguard Earth from human foolishness, and it begins to seem to me that offering a version of the counsellor conditions to the nonhuman world is not only possible, doing so will tend to promote personal change of just the kind which is needed to ground a more Earth friendly morality.

I have now described how three of the conditions—the counsellor or core conditions—might apply to a nonhuman locus of attention. That leaves three to go.

Contact, psychological contact, was the first of the remaining three. The therapist needs to work at that, and I can find no harm and much good in a genuine attempt to be in contact with the nonhuman. I don't mean that we should get silly; we just need to notice the way the leaves move, the paws go down; put ourselves in the way of experiencing rain against the cheek; be open to the other, the nonhuman other, in a way analogous to the openness of a counsellor to their client.

Condition number two was that the client be anxious, vulnerable, incongruent. *Does it map at all?* In a way, I think it does. Earth and everything on it is vulnerable, much more vulnerable than humans ever imagined until recently. It might lead to much good if we were more aware of that.

The really tough condition is the last one: “the client *perceives*, at least to a minimal degree...the *unconditional positive regard*...and the *empathic* understanding of the therapist.” With highly sentient creatures, both are possible, and I don't mean only those creatures which have evolved alongside us as dogs and cats have. Try walking in the bush here in Canada, in moose country, without a gun and without any ill intent towards moose. They abound. Take a gun and go look for dinner. *Where are the moose?* It may be said that moose just know what guns are, but I remember meeting a mother moose with her little one when I was lost and on a very narrow lakeside trail. Mother moose with their young are dangerous. I forgot that in my delight at meeting Mistress Moose that afternoon. We stopped, and gazed, and I felt her lack of ill intent towards

me as I think she felt mine. We both moved aside a little, and we passed beside each other on that narrow trail.

Can vegetative lives somehow experience or otherwise be affected by our intent, our feelings towards them? There is some positive evidence—try routinely saying ugly, negative things to a plant, and see what happens—and science is interested in this.<sup>3</sup> As for the rest of creation, the rocks and that stuff, how much do we really know?

### **Logical And Extra-Logical Conclusions**

The intricacy of the last two sections has almost but not entirely removed me from my experience at Candle Creek Falls. I need to ground myself again in what this is all about, and, as I have been writing, I have been watching evening coming on. The clouds which have boiled up and down the valley all day distributing rain, hail, and lightning are lifted higher now and form the kind of darkening ceiling which would have had Constable reaching for his brushes and his oils. The buds which I spoke of are unmistakably leaf-like, and there is just the slightest hint of a fresh emerald haze on the birch trees. This is what really matters; this is what I'm trying to write about, and I don't want to tangle the threads... I shall start with relationship, then.

Whatever else any particular person-centered therapist does or doesn't do, and whatever else they do or don't offer to their clients, they do offer relationship grounded in their own heartfelt attempt to offer the counsellor conditions. Whatever is actually going on in therapy that promotes healing—and let us be honest, nobody really understands, not yet—experiencing this kind of relationship is frequently and in itself transformative for the client. More to the point I want to make here, *offering* this kind of relationship is even more frequently transformative for the therapist: we come to value, prize, and even love our clients, and even someone as capable of misanthropy as I am, finds themselves looking upon humankind with at least a warm compassion.

What our troubled relationship with our lovely blue-green planet and only home requires is precisely this kind of transformation in our individual ways of relating to it. In other words, if we would each seek to offer an open-centered version of the counsellor conditions to everything else around us, and if we each tried to predicate *all* our relationships upon the six conditions, then my guess is that large and rapid changes would occur. Carl Rogers famously saw his recipe for human relationship as having relevance beyond the counselling room; I propose that it has relevance far beyond human-human interactions.

Of course, few if any of us can manage to offer this kind of relationship to anyone or anything on a 24 hours/7 days per week basis. Therefore, we have morality to guide us and restrain us, and we also have morality as a practice which encourages us in what—in our more enlightened moments—we believe to be the best direction. Seeking to relate to other humans *and* to all the rest—the *nonhuman*, the created order—on the basis of the person-centred recipe looks to me a pretty fine basis for such a moral practice. It also looks like precisely the kind of transformative and moral practice which I needed to be able to reference a decade or so ago.

At this point, I'm tempted to stop. If what I'm saying is not uncontroversial, it still remains resolutely secular and rational. Given a little tightening up here and there it involves nothing that a respectable environmental ethicist might not put his name to. However, if I do stop here, I am disowning whatever was with me at Candle Creek Falls, and I do not wish to hear that particular cockerel crowing.

It has been said that practicing counselling the person-centered way is a spiritual practice, and I think that I understand that in two ways:

- Any attempt to lessen one's own attachment to the vantage point which is "I" and to enter into relationship with one's own needs mostly set aside in favor of another's can be conceived as a spiritual endeavor. It moves a person in the direction of a kind of relatedness whose endpoint is the experience of real joining and blending, or to put it another way, perhaps, whose endpoint is temporary release from the illusion of separateness. Understood in this way, spiritual practice can involve a "spirituality" which need not invoke anything "otherworldly" or "mystical".
- Unfortunately, though, I seem to understand person-centered relationship as a spiritual practice in a further and more troubling way. I find that if I really seek to be core-conditionally present with another, and if I really try to be congruent and open to my experience, then "something else" usually makes itself known to my awareness, and it feels just like that of which I was so movingly aware as I stood at the foot of Candle Creek Falls.

I have no idea what to call this "something else" nor how to conceptualize it, but neither do I have any doubt that it is entirely trustworthy. I also harbour the hypothesis that many religions and religious practices have grown up around precisely this "something else", and religions and religious practices are, of course, mostly obdurately human-centered affairs. If my experience at Candle Creek Falls is anything to go by, then that is a very large mistake. Whatever is celebrated and entered into relationship with in temples, churches, and chapels is abundantly present

under the open sky and in the absence of any human construction at all. Indeed, for some of us, human works and activities are a significant obstruction. I must conclude that if temples, churches, and chapels are sacred places, then this whole Earth is a sacred place.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Deep Ecology was Arne Naess's radical response to an early recognition of the need for an environmental ethic and is probably best presented in Rothenburg (1989) which is a translation of Arne's Norwegian text.

<sup>2</sup> The claims I make regarding science and empathy are taken from the pages of new scientist and in particular Phillips (2004) and Cohen, (2004). They are available on the *New Scientist* database accessible through the Internet.

<sup>3</sup> Current scientific thought about the possible analogues of sentience and intelligence in plants can also be tracked through the pages and the online archive of *New Scientist*. The most recent article I have found is Phillips (2002).