

## Unpacking the congruence box

That's how it feels.

I was given the congruence box back when the job at hand was to make it safe for clients to teach me how to be a counsellor, and I've been unpacking it ever since. However much I find, however much I take out, next time I look there is something new. Either I'm being particularly slow on the uptake, or contrary to the received view that "congruence is not a complicated concept" (Mearns and Thorne 2007, p.122.) congruence is deeply complicated.

Or maybe—and if so I have been slow on the uptake—crossing person-centred counselling with focussing changes what congruence involves, and that, in its turn, takes congruence in the direction of a "spiritual practice".

### 1. The simple explanation or the complex one?

Initially, there was an apparently simple definition, some history, research claims, person-centred theory, and a recipe for a way of relating captured by Rogers's geometric metaphor: the way a counsellor presents themselves to a client should be isometric, or "congruent", with their current experiencing. *Why?* Because then the *client* is likely to achieve greater congruence and so experience less distortion and denial. Along with the counsellor's empathic understanding and acceptance, that in turn will reduce the hold of, and damage done by, conditions of worth. (Think Mearns and Thorne circa 1999—"the standard view". (Purton 2004, p. 17.)) A simple way to summarize all this is to say that the outside of the counsellor should match the inside while interacting with their client.

So long as we *are* thinking in terms of the standard view, and of original sources like Rogers (1957) and (1959), then this simplicity is probably both accurate and sufficient. However, Rogers's (1956) unpublished address "The Essence of Psychotherapy: Moments of Movement" suggests greater complexity. This is the paper where Rogers provides a more "focusing-oriented" view of things than he is usually credited with (Perraton Mountford 2007 and 2008), and illustrating congruence by

reference to a client, Rogers writes: “Her viscera, her tear ducts, and her awareness...are congruent”.

*Her viscera, tear ducts, and awareness...* In other words, and as Rogers makes clear in the same paper, congruence involves deep, bodily awareness, acceptance of whatever is in awareness, and what I think of as a "lining up" of the parts.

Given this way of thinking, neither the "outside" that a counsellor must match to the "inside", nor the inside itself, is a single thing. Together, they consist of all relevant parts of the organism and aspects of experiencing and awareness.

One way to think about this is to recognize that what is usually called "congruence" (*singular*) is now being thought of as the sum of many smaller "congruences" (*plural*). An awareness-inviting inventory of the body (of the kind used as a precursor to focusing: feet, ankles... etc.), followed by turning one's attention inwards and descending within the body in a focusing-type movement will reveal nothing denied and no felt inconsistencies. The counsellor who is congruent in this sense will experience a clear pathway between the deepest levels of their experiencing and their interaction with the client. Although whatever is implicit within the counsellor's experiencing at any given moment will not *necessarily* be shared with the client, it *could* be shared, and there will be no obstacles in the way of sharing it.

*How does that sound?* I don't know about you, but I find this *very* demanding. It requires not only a high degree of personal honesty and integrity, but an ongoing practice of acceptance and awareness that requires a steady monitoring of what is happening for me right now. It is not something which can be turned on for the client and turned off again at the end of the session. Understood in this way, congruence has to be practiced constantly and, therefore, lived. It also requires that I involve others, and perhaps other practices, in the monitoring process in order to help me deal with the inevitable self-delusions which are going to creep in.

Of course, no one has suggested that congruence is easy—just that it is conceptually uncomplicated—and counselling/psychotherapy has long recognized the importance of "self-care" and appropriate supervision. Even so, when things are spelled out in terms of parts and focusing-type

awareness, I find they look far more daunting than is suggested by the formula "the outside must match the inside". I'll go further: the kind of awareness and lived practice I'm now describing looks like the sort of thing I associate with *spiritual* practice.

Please don't misunderstand this last assertion. I'm entirely happy that person-centred counselling, experiential focusing, and the practice of congruence are secular, unrelated to any particular metaphysical systems or claims, and should remain so. For me, that is part of the beauty. However, if this is what congruence involves and demands of us, then—to my eye—it is closely related to traditional awareness and acceptance practices associated with metaphysical systems and claims. It's a "secular spiritual practice".

## **2. Running with scissors**

I think I have only begun to explicitly conceptualize congruence in this way within the past few months, but I had a sense of its enormity almost from the beginning. In consequence, the *practice* of congruence kept me so occupied that I didn't pay much attention to the theory for several years. Then, when I found myself trying to explain congruence to people I was now responsible for preparing to learn from clients, I had to start thinking again.

Telling counsellors-in-training that congruence is simply a matter of making the outside match the inside and getting everything nicely lined up is too much like telling young children to run with scissors. They're going to stab each other. Therefore, I looked around for a way to minimize the likelihood of serious injury and realized that given a focusing-type understanding of congruence, it can be presented as occurring in two stages. Stage I is being really honest with yourself, open to experiencing, self-aware...that stuff. Stage II is about not dissembling with others and not being thrown back into internal incongruence (denial and distortion) by what is going on in the immediate environment and relational interactions. Stage II is *not* about telling all and sundry precisely how a person feels about things right now. That's being a boor. What one says and does *must* be tempered by empathic understanding, compassion, and sometimes social and political necessity.

With counsellors-in-training, I stressed the importance of stage I and of

tempering, and I pretty much let stage II evolve. Paying enough attention to stage I, and ensuring regular focusing practice, counters *incongruence*.

On the face of it, this all seems sound enough, and—on balance—I do recommend teaching congruence in terms of these stages. There is, however, a demanding balancing act involved here, and the older I get, the more I wonder how possible it is to consistently achieve "internal" congruence, and particularly the deep "focusing-oriented congruence" I was describing above, while not "expressing" it. Sitting on what is being experienced slips so easily into simple *incongruence* while I am busy congratulating myself on possessing tact, compassion etc., and I shall need to say more about this later.

### **3. The importance of "real"**

Alongside the other initial contents of the congruence box, there were a number of references to Carl Rogers's growing recognition that congruence in the sense of personal "realness" is more important than anything else in the therapeutic relationship. He almost seemed surprised that the more he could just be himself with a client, be fully present with the client, then the better things went: (Baldwin 2000, p. 30)

I had responded to his feelings and accepted them, but it was when I came to him as a person and expressed my feelings for him that it really got to him.

I am inclined to think that in my writing perhaps I have stressed too much the three basic conditions.... Perhaps it is something around the edges of these conditions that is really the most important element of therapy - when my self is very clearly, obviously present.

Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne even begin their revised chapter on congruence with a similar statement: (Mearns and Thorne 2007, p. 119 quoting from Rogers 1973, p. 186)

I believe it is the *realness* of the therapist in the relationship which is the most important element. It is when the therapist is natural and spontaneous that he seems to be the most effective.

I *knew* about this back when I first started exploring the congruence

box. I think I even recognized truth and importance in what Rogers had learned, but it has taken me a long time to begin appreciating the magnitude of that truth and importance. A lot of clients and a lot of counsellors-in-training have been needed to convince me—*really convince me*—that my unvarnished, frequently irascible, and always unpredictable self is a much better therapist than any therapist I might try to construct from selected parts of myself. *Why did it take so long?*

I find two apparent reasons. First, all kinds of experiences had long convinced me that this unvarnished self was often a problem. He was best allowed out only when I was alone or in carefully selected company. Second, I think I changed. The kind of discipline and practice which is necessary to being a person-centred counsellor and trainer, coupled with other kinds of practice and "personal development", changed me sufficiently that even when I didn't know *what* I was going to do or say next—which I find is pretty much always—I didn't need to fear it. I guess I acquired sufficient self-awareness and self acceptance, strategically exploded sufficient personal land-mines, and accrued enough evidence of my own therapeutic efficacy to be confident that *whatever* I said or did, if it was authentic, it would prove part of a benign process.

Of course, if Rogers was right, then this should be close to a self-fulfilling prophecy. *But is it?* If the second reason *is* a large part of why it took me so long, then perhaps my younger self was wiser than I give him credit for. Perhaps the kind of realness which Carl Rogers advocated towards the *end* of his career could prove disastrous *early* in a career. If so, that is important for the way person-centred counsellors and trainers think about congruence and the acquisition of a personal therapeutic style. We need to trust ourselves and our counsellors-in-training to balance "realness" with caution and against the degree to which they currently trust themselves. For example, when my "therapy dog" died, I was careful in my responses to clients who needed to know how *I* was doing: I balanced expressed congruence against the need to function and to help them deal with the death of someone who had become very important to them.

Perhaps, too, the kind of "development" described above is part of the reason why—as noted at the end of the last section—I grow less comfortable *not* expressing what I congruently experience. As I

described earlier in section 2, I began conceptualizing and teaching congruence in terms of two stages in order to obviate the harm which simply "telling it like it is" can cause within a training community. Counting to ten before expressing congruence—or even to 10,000—is probably a wise policy during this period. However, it is wise largely because counsellors-in-training are, for the most part, still discovering their own personal landmines and doubting not just their therapeutic efficacy but all kinds of things about themselves. As those landmines are dealt with, as personal and therapeutic confidence grows and experience mounts, the risk of damagingly expressed congruence, and the congruent expression of thoughts and feelings which don't belong in the therapy room, will diminish. Counting to whatever number will always tend to decrease the counsellor's overall and readily available congruence, and perhaps with time and experience diminishment becomes too high a price for avoiding the now small risk of damagingly expressed or inappropriate congruence.

I think that's right. I'm not prepared to accept the diminishment because it no longer feels like a good deal.

#### **4. A dog still learning**

Four months ago, this was pretty much all I had to say about congruence apart from some thoughts on "transparency" which I will come to later. However, four months ago is a few clients less, and—in combination—those clients seem to have shifted my sense of what the congruence box holds. (Which is not to deny or disparage the rich literature discussing congruence, but somehow it has always been personal experiencing and clinical practice which has affected my understanding of and relationship with congruence, and those are what I'm concerned with here.)

At the time, I was re-encountering a phenomenon I hadn't met for a while and which I think of as "glass slipper syndrome". "Glass slipper syndrome" is trying to live a life which simply doesn't fit, half-recognizing that it doesn't fit, and insisting that it has to. Incongruence, denial, distortion, and often psychological and spiritual violence enacted by a person on themselves are deployed in order to get that unruly foot jammed into the place where it so clearly doesn't belong but has to go. The client *really does* intend to live this life. Unfortunately, their job

description for their counsellor is to help them succeed, and when I am the counsellor, I struggle.

How *does* one work with such a client? That isn't a rhetorical question. I find the client's need to involve me in this crime against themselves deeply troubling. Even acceptance becomes tricky because I *don't* accept that what is going on is a good idea, and it won't help matters if the client thinks that I do. However, if I don't sign up to the program, then the client is probably going to go away, and that isn't going to help either. The best I can usually offer is to listen, reflect, seek to understand and accept the person and their reality, and wait.

In contrast to all this, I had also begun working with "Caitlin". Caitlin contacted me because she *knew* that her life didn't fit, longed for authenticity, and sought "a real encounter of real human beings". (E-mail correspondence.) She planned a journey whose vehicle of choice would be experiential focusing and whose clear purpose from the outset was to replace distortion and denial with awareness and congruence. My initial job description was to be her focusing teacher. However, with massive understatement, what Caitlin calls "a pothole" immediately opened beneath our feet, and we realized that she needed a focusing-oriented therapist at least as much as she needed a focusing teacher. In consequence, I found myself part of two kinds of therapeutic relationship which couldn't have been more different—those which involved glass slippers and the one which began with focusing—and I was able to observe the resultant differences in myself and way of being.

Even the initial meetings were starkly different. The clients who wanted me to help them reshape into their lives were uneasy and, at times, suspicious of me. It was as though they sensed my potential to wreck their illusions. I had to be very gentle and either circumspect—verging upon incongruent—or deeply congruent and risk heaven knows what for the client *and* the therapeutic relationship. Instinct, felt awareness, and empathic compassion argued against expressed congruence. Even mild expressions of concern and understanding would be threatening.

This messed me up. I am a focusing-oriented counsellor, and I need to be in contact with my own deep, visceral, experiencing of the world

around me and with "the implicit". ("Implicit" in the focusing sense, see for example Preston (2010).) If I lose this, I lose my grounding, I lose my bearings, and I feel physically unwell. However, my clients' need to maintain incongruence, and my need to not rock their boat too much, was blocking me. I could not fully be because I'm not that good at disassembling and my be-ing was not what was needed or wanted here. The last thing these clients sought—or arguably needed just then—was the "real encounter" which Caitlin longed for. Caitlin *needed* "my self" to be "clearly, obviously present" (Rogers, quoted by Baldwin (2000) above.) but for the former clients even a glimpse of him was too disturbing.

Caitlin's need to know who her therapist was, what was going on for him during their time together, and that he *really was there* was clearly expressed by her during our face-to-face meetings and in a running e-mail conversation which accompanied and reflected upon those meetings. In consequence, I began to recognize a mutuality in our relationship which I had never clearly conceptualized before. We were discussing congruence by e-mail, and here is part of something I responded with:

There's more to this...because it's pretty difficult to be congruent in the presence of an incongruent other. Therapists know this, and they take it to mean the counsellor must be as congruent as possible for the sake of the client. But it goes the other way too, I think. The counsellor can only become fully congruent with a client who is willing to experience that and go on the congruence journey themselves. It isn't just therapists who can [block] their clients; clients can [block] their therapists... Once I sense that the client is trading congruence for something else in their lives which is more valuable to them at that time, then I begin to feel that therapy is pointless, and certainly my involvement in therapy is pointless.

For the first time, I'm recognizing that it isn't enough to say that the counsellor is "congruent in the relationship". Things are more complex and reciprocal than that. If the client can begin to welcome the counsellor's congruence and realness, then the counsellor is better placed to offer, and the client has a greater chance of receiving, more of the same. If the *client* can begin to welcome the *counsellor* into relationship, then the client has a better chance of experiencing the

reality of their counsellor. It's important to try to be really clear here: I'm *not* saying that I ever *choose* to be congruent or incongruent, to give of myself or to withhold, because of how the client receives me. If that's how what I said above has been read, then that's not what I intend. I'm saying that in a focusing, process sense—in a way that is outside volitional control—the client can facilitate or block my access to depths and degrees of felt awareness and open, spontaneous relating. (Please don't misunderstand me here either. I am not "blaming the client", but I am being "congruent" about how clients can affect me.)

This capacity to facilitate or block is important, and so I have spoken with focusing-oriented person-centred colleagues to determine whether their experience is similar to mine, and it is. Furthermore, they agree that working with clients who need to reject or avoid the congruence and the realness of their counsellor is exhausting, distressing work. It adds yet another pressure towards incongruence and the kind of under-involved, even dissociated, relating which is a sad hallmark of "professional" activities. It also entails that a counsellor who experiences things this way and is working with several such clients may find their own process compromised and eventually experience the kind of personal depletion and exhaustion that gets labelled "burnout".

To summarize what I am claiming in this section, "counsellor congruence" and "realness" are (1) much more of a mutual enterprise between counsellor and client than is generally recognized, and (2) qualities better titrated into the counselling relationship than ladled on wholesale. What I am finding in the congruence box *is*, once again, both complex and subtle.

*And what about the claim I made at the end of section 1 that congruence is a "secular spiritual practice"?* It is not forgotten, but I want all the current pieces in view before I return to it in section 6.

## **5. Present-ness, power, transparency**

As Caitlin was reflecting upon her sense of coming to depend upon our sessions and relationship, we exchanged the following by e-mail

Caitlin: I was thinking, about the nature of this relationship. I was checking with myself

Is this ok?

Is it trustworthy?

Is it equal?

It's yes, yes, and yes. But it's the last one I'm interested in. Is it ok to have expressed so much need, doesn't that tip the balance? No, strangely.

Does it mean I have given up power/responsibility for myself? No. Does it mean I think you have more power than me? No (though I think maybe you are stronger, like an athlete might be stronger, not a different kind of human being).

How can it be equal when all the attention is on me, that being the nature of it?

I think maybe because you are completely present, (which is astonishing and wonderful, and no mean feat, I don't underestimate it). I can know those facets of Clive, present in that time, as much as you can know those facets of Caitlin, present in that time. That's what makes it equal, in a human being way, and ok.

Both Clive and Caitlin turn, and are other facets, same but different, in other, separate, places and times.

Does that make sense at all?...

Clive: I think this does make sense, Caitlin, and I think what you are identifying is profoundly important. It is also personally interesting because the ability I have to create equal relationship flies in face of the apparently utter inequality of client therapist relationships in general...it is something I seek to understand... So what you are saying at the end here is that my present-ness, transparency, realness, even vulnerability somehow sets the balance right. Which echoes something else I have been told about how I work, and it helps make sense of things. It's like there can't be a power imbalance when the other person is fully there, fully visible, and allowing themselves to be vulnerable. Is that right?

Caitlin: Yes, that's exactly what I mean.

This speaks so eloquently for itself that I'm not going to further embroider the point Caitlin makes. Instead, I want to explore the relationship between what I'm calling "present-ness", transparency, and congruence, and so loop back to Carl Rogers's insistence on the importance of being "clearly, obviously present". (Rogers, quoted by

Baldwin (2000) above.) I'm using the clumsy locution "present-ness" because I'm never quite sure what people intend by "presence", and all I want to denote is simply "being there".

Transparency is usually rolled up into congruence, and although I don't want to say it is something altogether different, there is a distinction to be drawn. Given what I have said already, being congruent can be summarized as being-in-such-a-way that the outside matches the inside and all the relevant parts and aspects of the inside line up. Being transparent was best explained to me by a client to whom transparency matters very much. Looking across the room towards my desk, and it's evidence of my techno-geek tendencies, she insisted that being transparent means being like my computer. It has a window in the side that allows you to see its components. Transparency means that the client can look into the counsellor and see what's going on, and if the client isn't sure about something, or cannot see something they think might be going on, then they can ask for and receive a straightforward answer and, if necessary, view. In focusing terms, transparency means allowing the client access to the entirety of one's process while in relationship with them. That's not to say one foists it upon them, only that it is available if required.

This is *not* the same thing as "congruence" in the sense I find it is usually discussed. I have met perfectly "congruent" counsellors who meet requests for "disclosure" with responses like: *I'm wondering why you're asking me that*. Transparency, however, requires answering a straight question with a straight answer and leaving the exploration of motives and consequences until later, if at all. For a focusing-oriented counsellor, transparency entails a potentially clear view from the immediate interaction with the client through to the counsellor's deepest felt awareness.

My sense is that it is this kind of transparency which is central to reducing the power imbalance Caitlin writes of. Any deflection of a straightforward question or covering up of process involves asserting power, risks creating fear, tends to create no-go areas in a relationship, and when repeated contributes to good old-fashioned "simple" incongruence.

There's more to this story. What isn't there cannot be seen or

experienced. What the counsellor is dissociating from, or walling away from the client, cannot be looked into. If the counsellor is generally a little disengaged, musing about his dinner perhaps, then he isn't all there to be looked into. That's why present-ness is so important. Being *fully* present, and without defences and barriers, is necessary for *full* transparency and the kind of relational equality which Caitlin describes.

As I reflect on what I've just said here, it adds to the case for thinking that achieving congruence-*plus*-transparency in relationship with a client does depend upon the client as well as the counsellor. Being fully present necessitates being in process without barriers and defences, and achieving *that* depends—in part and as I described in the last section—upon the client being able and willing to engage in relatively honest and open relationship.

I also find myself thinking, yet again, that if this is congruence, then it is a very demanding practice indeed. It is something which I don't believe I ever fully achieve and probably never will fully achieve. There is a direction, some rules of travel, and a destination which is close to unobtainable. I *am* describing a "secular spiritual practice". Saying that, I feel the time has come to explore this aspect of congruence in more detail.

## **6. That secular spiritual practice**

It isn't just that congruence involves the sustained pursuit of awareness and the acceptance into experiencing of whatever comes along which I discussed in section 1. For the counsellor, congruence involves achieving awareness and acceptance into experiencing while relating with a client, and—at the same time—maintaining a high degree of empathic awareness and non-judgmental acceptance....Of course, that acceptance has to be genuine, and for some clients, "acceptance" is going to prove too cold-blooded and euphemistic. What they need is love—a "species of love" that asks little in return, and certainly leaves the counsellor's personal needs outside the relationship. Moreover, whether we are thinking in terms of acceptance or of love, it must be rooted deeply enough and substantially enough to withstand other feelings attendant upon relationship such as irritation, anger, bewilderment, hurt and rejection, etc.

This leads directly back to congruence again because although these feelings do not necessarily have to be shared with the client, they cannot be denied or hidden, and they have to be accessible to the client given what was said earlier about transparency. For the focusing-oriented counsellor, at least, that means maintaining a clear path from the depths of the counsellor's felt awareness to the immediate interaction with the client such that everything in between is "lined up" and congruent with its immediate neighbours.

As I said earlier, "a direction, some rules of travel, and a destination which is close to unobtainable", but apart from the awareness and acceptance requirement why am I calling this a "secular spiritual practice"?

My understanding of a spiritual practice is that it does two things: it helps a person become more of something they already are—to a degree and in potential—and it helps connect a person with something experienced as both transcendent and dwelling deep within a human being. This may under-define a spiritual practice because, to the best of my knowledge, that "more of something" always tends to be in the direction of greater compassion, less egocentricity, less concern for and attachment to material stuff... I'm tempted to add "greater spontaneity and authenticity", but perhaps that isn't always the case. Perhaps, too, there are spiritual practices intended to help people move in altogether different directions than this, but I am not aware of them. In any case, if we are talking about congruence, then all of this comes as an inescapable part of the package.

So much for a *spiritual* practice. By a *secular spiritual* practice, I mean a practice which aims only for the first of goals outlined above. *Does congruence fit the bill?* Unless I am missing something really important, then given the terms as I am using them, and given what I have found so far in the congruence box, then it does.

## **7. Afterthoughts**

Back at the end of section 2, and again in section 3, I discussed my misgivings about balancing expressed congruence against other demands. Part of the reason for those misgivings is a thread which has been running throughout this discussion but possibly not made sufficiently explicit. In order to be present, transparent,

congruent...real, and available for the kind of relationship those qualities facilitate, I need to take care of myself. I need to stay rooted, so far as I can, in my own experiencing, in acceptant observation of the movement from implicit into experiencing, and I need to keep the parts of me "lined up". Whatever pulls me away is a danger to this practice—even if it is compassion for another—and because incongruence is so easy to miss in oneself, the danger is in a sense completely off the scale.

I'm *not* saying that sometimes the cost of potential incongruence cannot be offset by the problems which expressed congruence might cause. I *am* saying that I think it happens very infrequently.

Finally, that secular spiritual practice again. When I *do* succeed in achieving something approximating congruent relating as I describe it here, when there *is* a fairly clear path between that which is implicit in me now and the person I am relating with, when I *have* set aside my own needs and concerns in order to be capable of relatively unhindered acceptance, and when I am seeking to fund all this—for me—deeply uncharacteristic endeavour, then my experience is that things do start moving in the direction of the second goal I ascribed to a spiritual practice. This is not at all unique or surprising, but I think we do best to hold even such a widely shared experience very, very lightly because, when all the traditional metaphors and myths are stripped away, humankind has not a clue what this part of the story is about.

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