

Notes From Inside A Whale

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I feel a little presumptuous offering these thoughts for publication. Most of my readers will have been there, done it. By now, you may even have worn out your tee shirt. Your initial counsellor training? *Who forgets it?*

And for most of us in the person-centred tradition, the training community meeting. Trainees and trainers gathered together. *In whose name?* No rules, no tasks; hour upon hour and week after week A large, unstructured group meeting rolling – and sometimes lurching – through the course. It is an experience which is now integral to person-centred training, and yet for many of us it is utterly puzzling at the time.¹

How do I make sense of this leviathan? Its belly is my natural home one day and a mincing machine the next. What's happening in here?

You see, I *don't* have my tee shirt yet. Two terms down and one to go in a full-time training programme. However, I have perceptions which I want to share before new experiences erode their freshness. I am overdue on my promise to write this piece. I meant to do something at Christmas; now it's Easter and it wasn't just 'pressure of work' held me back. What I thought I understood fell foul of that mincing machine or at least it seemed to...that's part of the story I want to unfold.

Let's begin somewhere relatively certain.

Dave Mearns writes that the community meeting is "a place to experiment with developing congruence".²

That seemed clear enough when training started. Congruence was being real, being genuine.³ It was allowing myself full awareness of what I experienced and thought from moment to moment. Of course, congruence didn't necessarily mean *sharing* that with anyone, but it did mean *owning* it, and it did entail *not dissembling*. Okay. I wanted to be a good counsellor and therefore a good trainee. What's more, I genuinely wanted relationship with my colleagues, and I knew from prior experience that incongruence gets in the way. So I struggled towards congruence. It wasn't easy; it was difficult. *Why* was it so difficult?

I re-read Dave Mearns, and I noted his comment about large groups being hard to norm and therefore unpredictable and challenging.⁴ That felt absolutely right, but it also felt like a comment which needed some unpacking.

Why was the community meeting un-normable and so unpredictable and challenging?

I resorted to metaphor.

¹ An introduction to the centrality of the community meeting in current person-centred training is provided by Mearns (1997), pp. 153-168, Chapter Ten.

² Mearns (1997), p. 159

³ For example Mearns and Thorne (1988), p. 14

⁴ Mearns (1997), p. 161

Being in small groups, being with people in a situation where interaction *can* be normed, is like going for a walk. It is a relatively cosy, every-day, safe activity because gravity (the consensual norm?) is pulling down nicely on the soles of one's feet. Serious tumbles are unlikely. By contrast, community meetings are like rock climbing, and not just any old scramble up a gently inclined face with plenty of holds and friction. No; community meetings are like taking on an overhang, a beetling slab where gravity just works against you. Gravity plucks your feet and hands from the rock. Every movement has to be calculated and made in a new and different way. There is no comfort; there is no rest. It is utterly unlike walking.

It's a pretty metaphor, but it doesn't really *explain* anything. I mulled it over, sought what I have since learned to think of as its "felt sense",⁵ and worried it some more. I came up with this:

- In small groups, I can negotiate a 'role' for myself and then live that role. I can also lubricate my interchanges with others via a repertoire of accommodations, joint understandings, manipulation, mutual back-scratching, tacitly agreed avoidances, etc, etc...I can 'fake it' ...with a little help from my friends.
- But this doesn't work in the large group.
- *Why?*
- Partly, I think, because I really do want to be real. But then again, I want to be real in the small groups, and it's ever so easy to backslide. There *is* an important difference between large and small groups.
- How about this then: The diversity of participants in the large group entails that no particular role or repertoire will work with and for everyone else in the group. I cannot satisfy *everyone, all of the time, by performing.*
- Therefore, whatever I do in the way of acting up to a role or managing interchanges will probably strike a false note with at least one other person. She is likely to reflect back her experience in some way, especially as she is trying to be congruent herself. Hence I am going to hear my false note echoing back to me.
- It seems I have three choices: a way of being in the group which I will experience as inauthentic and shifting, relatively congruent expression, and silent non-participation.

This felt right, and it reasoned right. What's more, it explained why I'd started with a rock climbing metaphor. You see, I loved climbing when I was young. Climbing demanded that I had to be *me*, utterly present, with access to every source of strength I possessed. Inauthenticity wasn't possible hanging off a difficult route with frozen hands and a winter sun going down over my shoulder. The felt sense of the community meeting was much the same: inauthenticity wasn't really possible.

More tellingly perhaps, as I observed my own experience in the large group, and as I watched my colleagues, my account of the 'mechanism' seemed to fit. We were working our way beyond roles and accommodations, through discomfort, and towards

⁵ As in Eugene Gendlin's "focussing". See, for example, Gendlin (1981) p. 32 where he describes a "felt sense" as: "An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at a given time".

authenticity. We were propelled by our own and each other's quest for congruence according to a recipe which looked like the one I've outlined.

I shared my perceptions with others and thought, "Hey, this may be worth writing about." But I didn't write about it because our community seemed to go pear shaped, and my theorising was left high, dry, and beached.

Suddenly, it seemed our meetings weren't promoting congruence at all. They were doing something entirely different. I had a strangled feeling in my throat and chest, a choking sensation. Colleagues voiced concerns which resonated with my own experience. One of our trainers spoke of feeling "blocked". It was as though I was learning congruence with my clients and my wife and learning something very different in the community.

What was happening now?

Our community has had its problems. People have left. People have left and come back. People have left, come back, and left again. We've had gossip, innuendo, factions, frictions, righteous anger, wounds, and pain in bucketfuls. We've debated and banished fear only to see him sneaking round the door next time a breeze cracked it open. We've not had an easy ride. But we have *tried*. We have tried, most of us, to be the core conditions. And that, some of us now think, is part of our problem...but I am getting ahead of the story. Let's get back to my own perceptions.

It was clear within the first weeks that we had problems. Some of us were very wounded, very scared. Early interactions within the community, both in and outside meetings, left some of us feeling even more wounded and scared. I reflected on this. I felt the only way for us to move through training together was to work on being acceptant, tender, and gentle with each other. Other people felt the same way. Some of us discussed this. Some of us promulgated a kind of norm: *We are here to learn to be person-centred*. I think we sat pretty hard on behaviour which wasn't judged to be person-centred.

In a way, the strategy worked. Only two people left us for good. And over the weeks, colleagues who had been too scared to participate fully in the community became more active. That was wonderful to observe and be part of.

But something was going wrong. I was choking; I was blocked; I was stuck. And I wasn't alone. We, the community, had got the balance wrong. There were things we needed to be saying to each other which our norm told us we couldn't say. In our struggle to be acceptant, to speak from a place of love, to make our community safe for everyone, we had short-changed our need to express our congruence. What's more, we had trampled all over our need to disagree and even squabble. We had become unreal and dysfunctional.

But could we have done otherwise?

That's what I am asking myself now, and the answer seems to be *No*. You see, our problems *weren't* imagined. The levels of fear *weren't* over-estimated. To stay together, to move through our process together, it still seems *necessary* that we should have held that protective norm for so long. Perhaps it was a chrysalis casing which our community is finally outgrowing.

And if so, what is that all about?

My colleagues and I are still struggling towards congruence, aren't we? At the same time, we are seeking a congruent way of being which is tempered by compassion and balanced by empathy. Congruence isn't letting it all hang out. But congruence isn't holding it all in

either. Some things *must* be said some times. And yet, they need to be said in such a way that they will be heard, in such a way that they will be known as coming from a place of love. That's the hard one. That is what we have been learning: *How to be congruent from a place of love*. To me, it seems the hardest trick in the book, and I suspect that it is the most important one. Thus, we come back to the experiment in congruence which Dave Mearns cites.

Is that it then?

I don't think so, not quite. I think I've learned something more from our training community's experience. And to give due credit, it was Brian Thorne, one of our trainers and lecturers, who nudged the piece into place for me. Brian was talking about abuse. I know abuse, I thought. I was abused as a child, I've taught and worked with those who have suffered abuse, and I now have clients who've been abused. I left school-teaching primarily because I was sick of a 'system' which felt inherently abusive. I guess I moved out of academic work for similar reasons: even the academy which I so love began to appear bullying, manipulative, insensitive, and not really 'person-shaped'. It didn't seem much exaggeration to say that I was driven to a person-centred training course because it appeared an island of acceptant sanity in a fundamentally abusive world.

I know abuse...or at least I thought I did. But I wasn't getting the full picture. The penny hadn't *quite* dropped until I read, and talked, and thought some more. It really *is* an abusive world. Everyday interactions and discourse are freighted with cruelty, put-down, bullying, disrespecting, power wielding, etc, etc. Observe workplaces, families, classrooms, playgrounds, probably even church congregations with a dispassionate eye, and abuse abounds.

There's more: hand-in-hand with abuse goes *deprivation*. Everyday living routinely exposes us to being unloved and unaccepted...not respected. Abuse involves the deprivation of love, and deprivation slides towards – perhaps it simply is a form of – abuse.⁶ As Hilary Thompson has so ably pointed out, abuse and deprivation are the warp and weft of our social tapestry.⁷ Yeuch! We are children of abuse and deprivation. Shaped by its terrors, we in our turn abuse and deprive those around us, and that includes ourselves.

Why should a person centred training community be immune to all this? Well of course it isn't. We each drag our fear and our learned ways of being into the training experience with us. *That's* what my community has been struggling with, I believe, a culture of abuse and deprivation. I didn't create it; he didn't create it; my friend over there didn't create it. And I am sure each of us would wish to disown it. But we have been so steeped in it that we inevitably continue it in our new home. Hilary Thompson writes that, "abuse and deprivation are an integrating context for counselling and psychotherapy".⁸ My experience is that this holds equally true for counsellor training. I don't mean that we

⁶ I thank Brian Thorne for reminding me of the significant relationship between abuse and deprivation; it is a large part of the tale I am now telling, and I left it inadequately lamented in an early draft of this paper.

⁷ Hilary Thompson (1992) devotes a significant part of a fascinating paper to supporting this thesis. Anyone who thinks my own statement of the problem overblown will find me in good company.

⁸ Thomson (1992), p. 225

trainees must learn about and to work with abuse and deprivation. I mean that we must learn it is the sea in which we swim.

A culture of abuse and deprivation is inimical to a person-centred way of being. As I struggle towards a person-centred way of being, I become aware of that culture. I begin to recognise how it terrorises me still and how I perpetuate it in my abuse of and withholding from others. The antidote of course is that person-centred way of being. It offers a way of relating to myself and others which is predicated on the core conditions, on empathic, acceptant congruence...*on balanced, tempered, congruent expression*. Sometimes, being person-centred may even entail accepting a measure of incongruence in and abuse from others, *but not at the cost of choking oneself*.

Thus, for a second time, I return to my theoretical point of departure. My colleagues and I are “experimenting with developing congruence”. But now I want to add a rider. We are doing it in the teeth of a culture of abuse and deprivation, and that is bound to make things difficult.

Could anyone have told us this in advance?

I doubt it because this feels like the kind of understanding which only experience can make clear.

Is that it?

Not entirely. As I reflect upon what I have written here, I realise that an important thread has gone unmentioned. *Self-acceptance* is essential to therapeutic practice, and *self-acceptance* goes a long way toward neutralising the fear due to past abuse and deprivation. Here’s the reasoning in a nutshell: *I’m okay. And if I am okay, and you abuse or deny me, then I needn’t rush to conclude that I am to blame. And if I am okay, then I needn’t fear what I may learn about myself through interacting with you.* Self-acceptance also helps undo the behaviours consequent upon abuse: *As one becomes self-acceptant, the tendency to abuse others withers.*

Dave Mearns stresses the importance of developing self-acceptance as part of the training process: “The major consideration with the personal development dimension of person-centred training is...self acceptance.”⁹ And on the following page, Mearns cites Carl Rogers’s Proposition 18 as a statement of the link between self-acceptance and acceptance of others.¹⁰

Yes, absolutely; *self-acceptance* is our desideratum. From self-acceptance there follows the basis for therapeutic practice and the broader promise of “tremendous potentialities” which Rogers eloquently catalogues.¹¹

And now some of the threads I’ve been worrying come together because self-acceptance and congruence go hand in hand. As we become more self-acceptant, congruence becomes

⁹ Mearns (1997), p. 35

¹⁰ Rogers (1951), p. 520

¹¹ Rogers (1951), p. 522. The more I revisit the Propositions of Rogers’s early personality theory, the more I find my own experience described there. In this case, Rogers’s description of the benign dynamic through which self-acceptance fosters, and is fostered by, other-acceptance and an undefended clarity of experiencing seems particularly poignant.

easier and more natural. As we struggle towards congruence – and towards an openness to experiencing our congruent reception by others – we learn more about who it is we are accepting. Add another wrinkle: Part of being congruent is experiencing our feelings about ourselves. So long as we remain non-acceptant towards ourselves, this experiencing is inhibited.

But perhaps I am getting ahead of myself again because this extra wrinkle grows more complex upon inspection.

The culture of abuse and deprivation denies us the experiences we need in order to learn to love and accept ourselves, and we become self-loathing instead of self-acceptant. I didn't fully realise it, but I arrived for counsellor training a dedicated self-loather. I arrived desperate for 'nourishment', scared to expose myself to it, and so wounded that congruence was almost impossible for me or any compassionate person relating to me.

- How can I stand up and accept the recognition and love which are rightfully mine when I am cowering in fear of rejection, another kick in my ribs?
- How can I respond congruently to another when I am myself starving for acceptance and terrified of being seen for who I am?
- How can others be congruently themselves with me when my anguish and need are so overwhelming?

No wonder some of us felt ourselves choking.

The rock-climbing metaphor seems apt again: I am stuck in a lichen-covered, rain-washed, greasy chimney with no good holds. I thrutch; I wriggle; I experiment. I move up; I slip down. Somehow, bit by bit, I find a tentative rhythm and a possible way upwards. Each of us in the community is seeking our rhythm and way upwards; the community as a body is seeking it, too. To me, right now, the rhythm seems to go like this: acceptance-by-others (just a little recognised), self-acceptance (just a little), self-discovery and congruence (a little), acceptance-by-others and self-acceptance (just a little more)... But that greasy chimney of past experience and fear means the rhythm keeps getting broken.

Abuse and deprivation; self-acceptance; congruence; self-knowing...love...the threads roll up together like the elastic stuff inside a golf ball. They give us weight and substance. They even help give us our bounce and our resilience.

Yes.

And for me, it is *essential* to name that first pair, to highlight that aspect of the story which Mearns and Rogers don't mention explicitly, *don't* name. The backdrop to my training and to becoming acceptant and congruent – the social and personal reality which makes development such a struggle – is the culture of abuse and deprivation.¹²

That's it, yes, that's it.

¹² I don't say it's not *inherent* in Rogers; clearly it is. To stay with the passage I mentioned earlier, Rogers writes of mother child relationships involving what I think we would now view as abusive elements. And perhaps that use of "would now" is an important part of the story. Rogers was writing nearly 50 years ago, and my perception of "abuse" is a very contemporary one. In conversation, Brian Thorne has noted that "abused" clients have only manifested during the latter years of his own therapeutic practice.

At least, that's it for now. This is only one telling of an aspect of one person's experience. It is one small window on a huge and complex process. So why have I chosen to share this particular window? Because although it is only a window, I think that the view offers something of relatively universal significance.

And if I have restated the known and perhaps the obvious, I hope you will forgive me. Some themes, I feel, cannot be revisited too often.¹³

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