

Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Approach: Toward an understanding of its implications

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When Lucila asked me to write a forward to this new compilation of work by my friend John K. Wood I agreed without hesitation. I was honored by the privilege and looked forward to it, but as it turned out, I was oblivious to the emotional challenge it would be. The book covers what were surely the most formative times of my life. The exquisitely observed descriptions of workshops and training programs evoke memories of the years John and I worked together—often with our friend and teacher Carl. R. Rogers—and rekindle the joy, fury, terror, pleasure, and pain of experiences that are part of the core of who I am today and of how I understand my reality and what I hope for the future. On my bookshelf still lies the reed flute John gave me at the end of the second Person-Centered Approach workshop at Mills College, in 1975. As we wandered along the tree-shaded path back to the dining room after a group session, he handed it to me without much comment, but wrapped in a copy of the first few lines of *The Reed*, a poem by the great Sufi poet Rumi.

Listen to the reed as it tells its tale;

it complains of separation.

Since they cut me from the reed-bed,

men and women have been crying over my lament.

*I wish for someone with a bosom torn apart by separation,
so that I can tell them the meaning of the pain of longing.
Everyone who stays far away from his own origin
seeks to get back to the day he was together with it.*

From time to time, I blow into it even now—I can't call it playing-- and as the breathy notes float out I imagine John's essence carried out on the sound. The tone hints of melancholy, at a sweet longing for a fulfillment that may never come, at a paradise imagined but yet to be gained, at anticipations of the Divine glimpsed yet still beyond the grasp. An eloquent wordless telling of the story of the work he committed his life to and of the yearning for reconnection with something beyond himself, that is undertone of so many of the stories in this book. So like John.

I met John in 1973. I had traveled from Ohio, where I was a professor at a small college, to meet with Carl Rogers, who had just agreed to be a member of my PhD dissertation committee. Rogers had also suggested that while I was in La Jolla I meet John K. Wood who, he promised, was "quite brilliant" and who "shared many of the same interests in expanding client-centered thinking into a wider and more evolutionary perspective." I took his advice. We agreed to meet the next day at two o'clock at Center for Studies of the Person, "for an hour". Our meeting lasted until nine—seven hours of exhilarating exploration of his thinking about consciousness and how it overlapped and intertwined with my own. I don't remember that we even talked about Rogers' work at all. That day began a wondrous journey as co-explorers of human consciousness—its mysteries and its

manifestations-- that took us to many countries and continues even now as I read his words.

John and I worked together in over thirty Person Centered Approach workshops and training programs in the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Mexico, Hawaii, and especially Brazil and many of these workshops provide the raw material for this book. John's exquisite talent for catching the meaning of significant moments in odd and often challenging ways, comes through in these raw and untempered stories. The poetic language evokes events that are part of my own life-long search to understand love and the relationship between individual and group consciousness. Reading these stories reminds me of countless hours spent in conversation with him as he applied his unique and quirky sensibility to whatever captured his interest. The Brazilian *macumba* ceremony, the workshop in the redwoods of Santa Cruz, scuffling on the streets of London with R.D. Laing, debriefing a psychotic episode in a community meeting, watching him beat the pants off players half his age on basketball courts in every location we worked, watching retired nuns lift their skirts to go paddling in the moonlight in Bahia, jammed in with pilgrims in St. Peter's Square, trying to understand "charisma" as Pope John Paul passed us in his Popemobile, rushing to Carl's São Paulo hotel room at two in the morning to help Carl work through a sudden loss of nerve about the apparent chaos in an eight hundred person encounter then underway, drinking *cerveja* on the beach in Pernambuco, reading dervish tales on Natalie Rogers' houseboat in Sausalito, California preparing for Ashland, Oregon workshop, now forms the story board of my own life's narrative. I recognize in my bones what he describes, because I was there. And yet reading about these events and many more as they are unpacked, rethought,

turned on their head and seasoned with John's penetrating wit, to become re-spun into a vision of a Person-Centered Approach that is uniquely John's, is both comforting and unsettling.

These chapters thrust me back to this life-transforming work as if it were yesterday

Both John and I were trained as scientists. We were in the world as open-minded explorers, and we were also in the world as skeptics. Despite the fact that he was often considered to be in line to inherit Carl's mantle as the theoretical leader within the Person-Centered community, John's abhorrence of bandwagons and orthodoxy and his habit of popping self-congratulatory bubbles meant that he actually occupied a somewhat marginal role, patrolling the periphery of the community with a critical eye and all the time yearning for deeper more truthful understanding that is often hard to see from the center. Both iconoclastic and yet profoundly wise, he believed that the greatest threat to PCA was its true believers, to those who saw it as a change technology or an intervention, and not an approach to life or a way of being. A strong theme in all our conversations, much in evidence in this volume, was our shared desire to expand the horizons of awareness at the same time as we avoided falling into the manifold conceptual traps and self-deceptions that were ever present, and that often seemed to be overtaking some of our colleagues—including Rogers. John had a strong aversion to any attempts to turn the subtle implicate reality of Person-Centered Approach into locked down, rule bound methods or finished theories. He believed the true potential of the Person-Centered Approach was missed this way, and instead of taking humanity forward into an expanded capacity to deal with what faces us as individuals and as a species, it often results in

ritualized behavior and pseudo-enlightenment. His way was the way of inquiry. This childlike willingness to point out a naked emperor if he saw one often antagonized those who felt that they had found truth with a capital “T” and more than once it resulted in John being uninvited to events that would have been strengthened by his presence. It was no surprise to us that when Rogers was taken to visit a Brazilian medium that claimed she could “help Carl Jung get a message to him from the other side”, John and I were somehow “disinvited” from the visit. But it was precisely because we both felt that something extraordinary had been glimpsed in these large Person-Centered group processes, that maybe we were witnessing some manifestation of consciousness that went beyond what we yet imagined, that we were committed to trying to understand it without illusion. We tried to keep each other honest because we understood, as John would point out, that “fool’s gold is only attractive because real gold exists.” We were in search of the real thing.

John was a truth practitioner. He would never settle for easy answers—preferring no answers at all. He lived in the questions and in search of an ever expanding experience of reality. But with every new experience we shared, John and I would sift through it, looking for learning, new insights, for false consciousness, for self-deception and for disillusionment. He would challenge me, I would challenge him; we encouraged each other to get way out onto the edge of what we knew and we picked each other up when we fell—and believe me, there were times when we each had profound doubts about whether any of it was any use at all. Yet from within the crucible of a dialog that lasted years emerged a person-centered theory of large groups that held out for the possibility

that human beings might have the capacity to emancipate their spirit even further, and to tap into the vast potentialities of a still expanding universe.

Over the decade from 1974 to 1984 our multiple observations of the groups in which we were involved, suggested that the large group process could potentially provide a more powerful (although much scarier) path to consciousness development than either the small group or individual therapy. More startlingly, we observed that sometimes a group could arrive at a state of consciousness in which the collective wisdom of the community—the group’s mind—could be both accessed and fed by any individual. I became convinced that the next stage in human evolution will be a collective process, where we learn how to harness the power of the minds of communities without subordinating the individual subjectivities of their members. The search for such a process has been at the center of my work ever.

There are many who had such conversations with John while he was with us. The essays that have been collected here provide an opportunity to engage in dialog with him once more, to participate in his creative process, to experience his intellectual courage and poetic imagination. His keen observations of Person-Centered processes and practitioners, are a gift to anyone who is interested to delving deeper. They are both loving and fierce. Some of the essays are highly critical in a way that only a true friend has any right to be; none more so than the essay on the workshop Rogers and colleagues organized with Central American government officials in Rust, Austria. Offering a divergent perspective from the one published by Rogers, John lays bare the ways in

which Rogers' consummate naïve American optimism and simplistic ideas about the nature of conflict, resulted in underestimating the scope of the long standing antagonisms among those present to the point of hubris, and misjudging how difficult it would be to make any real progress towards reconciliation in such a short time. John considered the event a failure, not because of any flaw in the principles of the Person-Centered Approach per se, but in flawed application. In particular, he considers that the difficulties faced were self-inflicted because organizers strayed from what John considered to be the essence of a Person-Centered Approach—honoring the subjective experience of the participants and trusting in the self-organizing wisdom of the group—and in their anxiety, opting instead for a over facilitated process and setting up expectations which bordered on cultural insensitivity. What John could not know when he wrote his critique, is that participant Oscar Arias, then President of Nicaragua and again now, recently sent a message to one of the organizers stating that he keeps a photograph of Carl Rogers in his office and that the experiences of the meeting at Rust are with him still.

The scathing discussion of Charles Devonshire's Cross-Cultural workshops is also sure to make people uncomfortable as John questions to what extent they were “cross-cultural” at all, and exposes what he considers to be the cult-like characteristics of these events like the use of insider jargon, repetitive rituals, the presence of attendee “regulars”, and facilitator-contrived agendas. In John's view presented here these workshops mimicked the form of the Person-Centered Approach workshops but missed its essence.

Not all the essays as are critical as these two but as any conversation with him inevitably would, these works prod, provoke, poke fun, dispute, undermine, and frequently debunk much of what these days is taught as the Person-Centered Psychotherapy. Like the shamanic trickster, John's dissident interpretations and wildly unconventional framing should force Person-Centered practitioners, especially those who convene large groups, to think again about what they are doing, and what they believe, and to radically re-examine the assumptions under girding their views. These accounts reveal, I think, the deep philosophical differences that gradually opened up between Client-Centered orthodoxy and a smaller heretical group that was involved in large group encounters and in a sense a wider mission. For some of us, who had experienced many Person-Centered Approach workshops in diverse locations, there had emerged a shared intuition that that if faith in the basic relational principles central to the Person-Centered Approach (though by no means exclusive to it) could be sustained long enough, and the darker existential moments faced without denying them or trying to suppress them, something far more valuable and more transformative than a better psychotherapeutic method was at stake. Somewhere along the way a shift in our consciousness took place and we began to understand what we doing less in the terms of an instrumental and causal phenomenon and more as an emergent process by which a vast implicate wisdom might be apprehended and brought to the service of a suffering world, and ultimately to the evolution of consciousness. In these pages you participate in John's thought process as he explores these ideas through the years, for his own understanding and for the benefit of anyone interested in the question of humanity's future. He sought people as friends and colleagues who would engage with him in the difficult questions. Here in the chapters

that follow is an opportunity for the conversation with him to continue. In one of the essays John says something we discussed many times, “Person-centered approach may not be as much as people believe, but it might be far more than they imagine.” If readers allow themselves to enter this dialog with John, be carried along on his rigorous and unsentimental examination of the many weaknesses and unrealized potential of Person-Centered Approach, and participate in his search for the deeper meanings of our experience they will inevitably become part of the evolution of the Person-Centered Approach, and perhaps much more than they imagine.

Readers should not look for the academic form of scholarship in these pages. John is a voracious reader, mining for the deep meanings of what his authors are saying. provocateur, master story teller and hugely original thinker – but he is not an academic. Like accomplished creators of parables of any age, he casts a wide net for his supporting evidence, quoting poets as often as neuroscientists, and works from centuries ago along with contemporary research and his reasoning is that of the Alchemist as much as the scholar. Most significantly for any students who read this, he makes no attempt to follow scholarly conventions such as a balanced treatment, a comprehensive literature review, the most contemporary sources, or evidence that might counter his arguments. What readers will find however, is a quick-silver mind at play with the material of a life-time of closely observed experience. If readers allow themselves to be carried along on his rigorous and unsentimental examination of the many weaknesses and unrealized potential of Person-Centered Approach they might find the gold. John had more faith in

conversation as a path wisdom than almost anything else. He sought people who would engage with him anywhere he went. Here in the chapters that follow is an opportunity for his conversation to continue.