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THE WORLD I LIVE IN

I would like to put a question to you.

My study at the Institute of Orthopedagogics is room A 404. When I am there the door is often open.

found the door closed with a note on it as follows?

For two weeks you will not see me here. The state of affairs in the world threatens me so much that I need time to reflect and build up my strength. Although I am not at work, you, my colleagues and students can reach me if you want. I am in a little tent near Woensdrecht air base.

(Where the new missiles are supposed to be installed).

It is there that I shall try to make up my mind about the threat of destruction that the new missiles mean for me and the world.

It is the place where I feel very much like talking to others about what haunts me.

For me things have gone too far. I hope to talk to you there.

I am curious about your reaction on seeing this announcement.

Curious also about how my employer will react.

I believe carrying out this idea involves certain risks. Risks in the sphere of relationships, where emotions can develop into open hostility.

Risks that I cannot foresee.

I am playing with this idea.

I firmly believe that this idea can become a reality and this gives me a very special feeling.

A feeling of relief, a tremendous psychological freedom.

Hope in a world full of despair.

The idea came to my mind in Geneva, last week. I was taking part in a short workshop on the subject: "Resolving situations of social tension". The main organiser of the meeting was Carl Rogers. Carl Rogers, American counsellor, psychotherapist; psychologist,

usually placed in the third school of psychology: humanistic psychology.

Rogers himself does not care much for these kind of labels.

His initial activities were in the field of psychotherapy. His approach was first called nondirective, later on client-centred.

Characteristic of the therapy was his view of the therapeutic relationship and the basic attitude of the psychotherapist.

This concept appeared to be important for human functioning in a broader sense.

With his book *Freedom to Learn* (that was totally revised for the 80's) he had a great influence on education. Already in the 70's he had reached the conclusion that his views were important for every human relationship whatever the background.

He works with big encounter groups and also with groups, that are suspicious of each other and even hostile. He calls his approach the PCA (the person centred approach). The workshop in Geneva was such an encounter. We explored tensions and conflicts in our personal situations and related these ideas to our feelings about the violence in the world.

The idea for the note on the door of my study came to my mind during a discussion, in which someone

described his feelings of powerlessness in face of the alienation and violence in the world.

I could place myself very simply in the same position.

The idea of my little tent in Woensdrecht offered a glimmer of light for me.

It was not the first time that I had openly confessed my anxiety about the future of the world. Certainly my deepest confrontation with this question happened to me during these kind of big group encounters.

Mammoth group-encounters

Since 1973 I have been involved in different ways in these big-group-encounters.

The first European gathering was in the Netherlands, in Driebergen. In the USA, for instance, in such an encounter, young people from different countries, all students in the USA, and native US students, confronted each other. Many tensions appeared to exist between these different national groups.

In a workshop setting, in which people try to listen to, and try to understand each other, these tensions appear to lessen and understanding and acceptance of personal differences develops.

In 1982 such a big group encounter was held in Mexico. The first Forum for the PCA (Person centred approach). For that workshop, held

for the celebration of Carl Rogers' 80th birthday, I wrote an article, giving more detailed information about the PCA. *

Humanistic psychology can find a place in the new science.

It perceives life as growth and the individual as a whole.

It accentuates the importance of choice.

It is happy with the emphasis on awareness.

It gives a basis for the explanation of the so called "altered status of consciousness".

Rogers claims that behaviourism and hierarchical authoritarian systems go together.

The new science and Humanistic Psychology fit in better with the concept of democracy.

My despair

Rogers' lecture led to a group discussion to which I did not contribute.

I instinctively dismiss this black and white contrast, made between the two psychological streams. I believe that Rogers' theory and practice does not need this kind of justification. (I am aware that this interpretation is my own projection).

* Developments in life and work of Carl R. Rogers.

One of the speakers in the group discussion is the Japanese Naoko. My brain registers a remark of hers:

"My son asks me, if there will be a world in the future".

Rogers knows of a survey from which it is evident that a large percentage of children think about this question.

The discussion continued with the exploration of what PCA can contribute to eliminate the threat of world destruction?

I keep silent, preoccupied by Naoko's son's question.

It is a question that is always on my mind. A question my son Eelco, has also asked.

I can see myself sitting on the edge of his bed.

The least I can do for him, when the bombs fall, is to wait with him hand in hand till it is all over.

All this suddenly opened my eyes to the realisation that this terrible question is also my own question.

A question that applies to me and one I have to ask myself.

Who can help me?

All at once I realised that both my son and I are in the same boat.

Back to the group discussion.

A deep grief

In that workshop in Mexico, for the first time feelings of utter hopelessness about the world overcame me.

I felt a deep despair.

I want so much to explain this, even more I want to communicate my feelings.

I know that reading can be such a remote activity, that mutual feelings do not come easily.

Maybe a good thing to do, as you read on, is to ask yourself a number of times, exactly what my experience means for you.

If you care to tell me your reactions, I shall be very pleased.

It is about my grief and my despair that I want to tell.

It happened in a subgroup. One of the subgroups which met for part of the day. In that workshop Carl Rogers was going to lecture on the PCA and new developments in science.

Can a theory save the world?

Rogers says that nowadays he reads a great deal in the field of physics; biology; chemistry and bio-feedback.

Our dominant opinion of science is based on Newton, which is founded wholly on the material world and

leaves no room for the personal. Newtonian thinking is cause-effect thinking. For "newness", for the new, for the spontaneous there is no place. Man is a machine. In psychology, predictions about this machine are possible. So man becomes controllable. The conception of man by Freud, mechanistic in character, and also that of Skinner, who neither recognises nor values creative activity, fit into that Newtonian picture. Rogers believes that for humanity this Newtonian view of science does not hold true.

A new conception of science seems to be developing. Rogers names the authors: Prirogine, Capra, Barbara Brown, and in particular Marilyn Ferguson.

Rogers suggests that these authors introduce a paradigm-change of the same magnitude as the change from the theory that the world is flat, to the understanding that it is a sphere.

Rogers appears to see this new paradigm as supporting his approach to human relationships. Finally he compares the ideas of the new scientists with behaviourism and humanistic psychology.

The behaviouristic approach to man is based upon Newton and ignores any study of the living organism.

Behaviourism pays no attention to awareness, free will or choice.

I still don't react.

I go on dreaming.

What came to my mind so suddenly seems to be too complicated to explain.

I thought I would not be able to express myself in English. This was my thought: Some time at the beginning of this year, I was walking in the centre of Amsterdam when I saw on my left the windows of an art gallery.

Through the glass I could see a collection of sculptures and relief panels. The sculptures were of foetuses. But foetuses outside the womb. They were made of a kind of plaster, chalky, white. Some of the foetuses were sitting on opaque, oval, glass eggs. They held stylized firearms ready to shoot. Behind their backs they were being shot at themselves.

In one of the panels behind the back of a shooting foetus a rain of bullets was embedded in the plaster.

Mankind's consciousness is no further developed than that of an unborn child.

And this consciousness is already destructive.

At least that was the interpretation that immediately came to my mind.

And . . . specifically - mankind, puts my son and me on the same level.

Is there still a world for me?

I belong to those who destroy. As long as I don't turn against the tide I am helping the world to destruction. What can I do?

The group discussion became, I felt "just talking" about what we might do. Ideas about what we could do, I heard as misdirected optimism.

When it came to an end, I felt as if I were crying, very unusual for me.

Crying without tears, but three of the participants, Anne, David and Margaret came to me and sat around me.

Anne said: you are full of something you didn't say.

Once again I felt myself sink into deep despair.

After some time I talked about what was preoccupying me. The part about the sculptures I skipped, too difficult to explain.

Later I told that part to Barbara and Leif in the swimming pool.

I told them further what I had tried to do in the sphere of the person centered approach.

I told them I had taken the initiative of setting-up a Flemish-Dutch Association for Humanistic Psychology (VNHP); that it had cost me a lot of energy, for which I had received too little in return.

I concluded that I often demand too much of myself, more than I am able to bear.

I said that I could not see what PCA can contribute in a world that is clearly moving towards its end.

I cannot see what I can contribute.

It is a full time job looking after myself, my physical health; doing my work, taking care of home and family and all that this involves.

I wish fervently that PCA could become meaningful, I feel far from optimistic, but I would be grateful for a single ray of light in the darkness.

What can Beate do with her anger?

I was in Geneva during the week of the 19th September. Wasn't it peace-week?

Photographs on the front page of the Swiss newspapers showed mothers from Berlin demonstrating in Geneva. They wanted to meet USA and USSR negotiators.

In the workshop Carl Rogers interviews a German woman. It happens in front of the 90 participants.

She, Beate, says she feels threatened by the situation in the world.

She looks upon herself as a strong woman, but she cannot use her strength for anything meaningful. Often she feels like killing herself.

Beate describes her life. She used to live in a big city in Germany, which she had then left to live in a small village.

Through that change she hoped to gain a feeling of psychological space.

But even in the village she cannot escape the ills of today's world: the water is polluted; the ground is polluted; nearby are three nuclear power-stations; there are depots for nuclear weapons in the area; Phantom fighters with their deadly load fly over daily.

Beate feels threatened. She feels aggression within herself. On the way to the workshop she stopped and walked along the banks of the lake of Geneva; clear water; flowers; the mountains in the background already capped with snow; the unexpectedly warm sun.

In the midst of such beauty she felt torn with grief, because in a few seconds everything could be wiped out.

One small human mistake is enough.

She cannot do anything constructive with her energy.

I recognize her feelings.

A powerlessness moves her to tears.

Does she weep from grief or anger?

Recognition

In Mexico I had already experienced this feeling of recognition.

Because of this grief I convened a subgroup to explore the theme: "5 minutes to midnight".

I suggested the subgroup because of the fact that several participants talked about how much time remained before the earth's final extinction. Some people even called the time left for the earth "5 seconds before midnight".

The group that gathered to discuss this subject consisted of 30 people from 14 different countries.

I remember clearly that the discussion was quiet and serious. A few points that come to my mind:

the American participants, to their regret, saw their own country as the biggest aggressor;

Russia, in comparison with the USA certainly, is a poor country;

Japan is a very strong country economically, a nation with an economy not based upon militarism.

Japan is being forced by the USA to adopt an economy of war; the danger of an all out destructive war does not constitute all the world's problems.

An Israeli woman told us that she had never known peace in her life.

That morning she had received a letter from her son, who was fighting in Beirut. She feared

constantly for his life. "As a teacher what must I teach the young", she asks herself.

"Values of violence and self defence are the only ones that are relevant".

The way of talking was not particularly emotional. Only in the silence at the end of the meeting could I recognize the same kind of grief in many of the participants. Had this grief been there all the time during the meeting and I had been unable to see it?

Painful though this realisation was, it brought to me a sense of relief.

I was clearly not the only one with that feeling of grief and despair.

Rays of light

In Mexico I was still in search of a ray of light, and later I became certain that the mutual sharing of this deep feeling of despair was itself a ray of light.

And more rays of light appeared in the dark.

Aaron of the peace movement

One of these rays was the presence of Aaron Tovish, 37 years of age, who lives in Stockholm. Aaron works for the Peace Movement, his daily needs sustained by a small allowance from his mother. He has been staying in Geneva because he wants to meet people, who can give him information about the

negotiations between the Russians and the Americans.

I get to know him in a small continuing subgroup that meets regularly during the workshop.

Aaron is looking for support for the work of the peace movement. He asks himself: "how can we become more effective? People participate in the peace movement, because they are afraid, or because they need to put over certain ideas.

A lot of time is wasted in meetings and discussions between participants in the peace movement.

"Is there a chance that Rogers' approach could help us to listen, understand and react better?

"The people who participate in the movement because they are afraid need to change psychologically. They must learn to see the world as something they can influence.

I think Aaron has some inspiring ideas.

He wants deliberation at the highest level and negotiations in conflict situations facilitated by psychologists.

"Isn't that what Carl Rogers wants too?" Aaron asks himself. - as an alternative to military service he wants a possible choice to work actively in the peace movement. In Austria this plan seems to have a chance.

He has written a paper which he distributes. It starts with a metaphor:

Two drug addicts propose to a psychologist that, if they can have a plentiful supply of their preferred drug, they will try, in good faith, to talk each other out of their bad habit. The psychologist is no fool, but these are hard-core addicts, so he decides that anything is worth a try. As the drug-taking escalates, when should he lose faith in their "good faith"? After a few days, a week, months?

For Aaron the USSR and the USA are the addicts. Addicts who have created the nuclear escalation.

It is no longer a game that concerns them alone. It is high time for other countries to become involved.

Talks on disarmament must be presided over and the agenda made by an independent third power, representing the other countries.

Tensions inside yourself and in the world

In the big workshop group a lot of searching discussion takes place about the relationship between tensions in the personal sphere and tensions in the world.

Many of the participants appear to have problems in their own relationship (Are these problems growing?).

After having talked about situations that are well handled, other people tell about failures in their private lives: we do things wrong, even though we want to do them right. In regular meetings of my subgroup we explore these problems somewhat further.

In our subgroup of 17 people, 2 women appear to have lost their husbands by suicide.

Another woman still suffers from her husband leaving her. A month ago she was exchanged for a young girl. After 30 years of marriage.

A girl of twenty tells about the quarrels her parents had and the suffering they caused her. She did not understand them and these quarrels frightened her.

But now she is very happy with her parents and she admires them for the good relationship that they had to fight to achieve.

Another woman was shut out when her parents had a fight. A quarrel behind closed doors. A quarrel that stayed "in the air" and which she could do nothing about nor was she allowed to.

"I never learned how to handle a fight. That's why my own relationship went wrong", she says.

Is it possible for people to live together in mutually satisfying relationships?

And is there a parallel in the field of big international relationships with small, personal, relationships? The answer Carl Rogers gives us is that there are indeed many parallels, the dynamics of approach and repulsion are in essence the same.

The opportunities for persons in international negotiations

Because of his most recent activities Carl Rogers has been invited by the Club Diplomatique de Geneve.

He tells about his experiences with big encounter groups, with groups that hold hostile positions towards each other.

He elaborates on an encounter between Northern-Irish protestants and catholics, as an example of the possibilities of improving contact, acceptance and understanding between strongly hostile parties.

Specifically he speaks about the Camp David negotiations. The peace talks between Sadat and Begin with Carter as an intermediary.

Rogers considers the Camp David meetings as a breakthrough in international negotiations, mainly because of the personal and informal style of the talks.

We feel powerless.

Is it perhaps outside the University where the dialogue has to be continued?

So where do we go from here?

There is a growing distance between people, more things are handled on an impersonal level.

I have found a place for myself. So, when you find a note on my door saying that I am in Woensdrecht you will know what it's all about.

the celebrant

his father chose
the season with care.

between the graces of thanksgiving turkey
and resonant shouts of new year's cheer

his father would rehearse
his lines of self-pity, visiting tombs

of ash and wild rose
he would feast on thorns and gruel,

piecing together the ghost shreds of the past
with the forgotten until his need

relived his dream. to forget and to remember
were one and the same. opening

his presents in the shadows
of joy, of love

unseen, his father chose
the season with care.

Wilson Stapleton
