Spiritual accompaniment and the legacy of Carl Rogers

Brian Thorne

I fluctuate these days between a deep yearning for rest and a quiet life and the consciousness, which is often further heightened by my dream life, that we are living in desperate times and that to be an ageing ostrich is to perpetrate a form of self-betrayal which could threaten the entire meaning of my life and work. This talk is an attempt to devote what energy I have left to sounding a clarion call to those who cling still to the belief that humankind is called to embrace love and life and to oppose the forces of death and darkness. I feel rather like an explorer lost in a raging blizzard who knows he must keep awake and struggle on when the overwhelming temptation is to curl up in the snow, go to sleep and seek the comforting arms of death.

The clouds all around us are black indeed. Many have their origins in the appalling horrors which are almost too numerous to recall that permeated the last century. A kaleidoscope of monstrous and vile acts of human barbarity would include Nazi concentration camps, the Battle of the Somme, the destruction of Hiroshima, the fire bombing of Dresden, Stalin's Gulags and, nearer to our own times, the blasting of Fallujah, the Darfur massacres, the terrible genocide in Rwanda and the Congo, the horrors of Dunblane and of an obscure school in Caucasian Russia. The endless list activates yet more despair when we acknowledge that similar things are going on *now* and that they are becoming even more abominable with suicide bombing taking place worldwide and extreme fundamentalist religion, both Christian and Islamic, stoking up hate with sinister calls for martyrdom or revenge in many parts of the globe. Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East are never far from our consciousness.

The picture becomes even more grotesque when we dare to face the environmental and ecological disaster with which global warming confronts us. Hurricanes, earthquakes, the Asian tsunami, drought and famine, and the

present floods here in Britain, are but heralds of what probably lies ahead and in recent months more and more people have come to know this in their bones and fear for themselves, their children and those as yet unborn. And still the juggernaut of materialism continues on its lemming-like rush to catastrophe, our addictions to the motor car, the aeroplane and to mindless consumption continue apparently unabated and the president of the most powerful nation on earth only reluctantly acknowledges that there might be a problem and then still states that it is not scientifically proven anyway.

I wish I could bring this doleful catalogue of gloom to a halt but something compels me to continue. These terrible black clouds are beginning to choke and stifle our mental and emotional lives. Depression and anxiety are rife in our culture: more and more of our children and adolescents are succumbing to psychological disorders, medication soars and the drug companies grow richer, mental health provision, as the need increases, diminishes, so-called communication technology reduces face-to-face encounter, dumbs down the articulation of feeling, creates crazy worlds of virtual reality where perversity roams uncontained and where the middle-aged pretend to be children and children pretend to be adults. We have all but succeeded in creating a world where unbridled cleverness, uncontrolled greed and malevolent narcissism make it almost impossibly difficult to hold on to sanity and to the vision of an evolving humanity.

There will be those of you who believe that I am going over the top and painting altogether too black a picture. Indeed, there are many days when I

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accuse myself of such exaggerated pessimism. Surrounded in a bus by a crowd of happily chatting young people, it is easy to see myself as a grumpy old man who is wistfully thinking back to a time which probably never was and is busy condemning a society which has moved on and now speaks a language he will never understand. And then I have to open my eyes again to the manifest misery which lurks just beneath the surface of things. I turn on my television set and I open my daily newspaper and I begin to believe not only that I am not exaggerating but that my verdict on our current predicament is nowhere severe enough: last year, after twenty-three years as an accredited member of BACP, I decided not to renew my accreditation. There were many reasons for this decision, not least my gradual withdrawal from the day-to-day activity of counselling, but I must confess that the sense of freedom which I experienced was surprising. After all, it was I who back at the end of the 1970s had been chiefly instrumental in designing the

accreditation scheme for the then Association for Student Counselling which a few years later became the basis for the BAC scheme. There was a period when to some of my colleagues I was known as Mr. Accreditation. In many ways I do not regret my enthusiasm in those days for raising the quality of counselling on offer and for creating opportunities for counsellors to seek further training and to enhance their evolving professionalism. They were pioneering days and that they resulted in the advancement of counselling as a skilled and ethical activity I have no doubt. My sense of freedom and relief at relinquishing my accredited status springs from different sources and it is these which I now wish to subject to further reflection.

My overall sense is of a movement from the liberation of the pioneer to the restriction of the veteran. When the first schemes for accreditation were devised they constituted an invitation to development and growth in knowledge and effectiveness. They were enthusiastically embraced by those who cared deeply about the work they were doing and the clients they were serving. Today the motivation of most who seek accreditation is very different. There is a fear that without accreditation there will be no credibility and probably no job. What is more the continuing threat of statutory regulation suggests that those without accreditation will find it difficult to jump on to the state bandwagon once it starts rolling. This move from a motivation induced by enthusiasm to one induced mainly by fear of exclusion says it all. My relief at no longer having to fill up forms to indicate my developmental activities (a requirement of the now annual snooping into my life), of no longer having to pester my supervisor for an anodyne report, of no longer producing a photocopy of my insurance arrangements - this relief was quite disproportionate to the comparatively small effort required to produce the necessary documentation. The relief sprang from a strange sense of having regained a lost freedom and with it there came a new surge of creativity. I realized —and the realization was at some level profoundly shocking — that I was undergoing experientially what I had long since known intellectually. The world of counselling and psychotherapy has degenerated into an unhappy reflection of the society which constitutes its context. In the same way that the universities have ceased to be the conscience and the critic of the prevailing culture, so have counselling and psychotherapy ceased to stand apart from the neuroses which drive most of our clients to our doors. We, too, have succumbed to an obsession with targets and achievements, goals and outcomes, empirical validation of processes which lie outside known research paradigms, quick solutions to complex problems, financial evaluation of matters concerning life and death and, perhaps most sinister of all, the manualisation, even computerisation of the mysterious ebbs and flows of intimate relationships which have the capacity to restore hope where there is despair and even to welcome into the world those who have received no such welcome.

We are on the verge of removing the heart, the artistry, the mystery from the therapeutic encounter and substituting a sterile functionalism buttressed by spurious research and bureaucratic surveillance. Professional standards and codes of practice masquerade as concern for clients but in reality safeguard the livelihoods of therapists by underlining their supposed

competence and respectability. A further insidious tendency is to collude with an increasingly litigious culture by installing fear in those therapists who might be tempted to trust their creativity and intuitive gifts and so dare to enter into a relational depth with clients where boundaries are less rigid and roles less sharply defined. Perhaps it is not surprising that in a culture where a lack of relatedness characterises the lives of increasing numbers of people, counselling and psychotherapy should move in the same direction so that the abject fear of close involvement and the even greater terror of over-involvement is leading to systems and practices where under-involvement seems guaranteed. Not surprising, perhaps, but inordinately sad, for it threatens to deprive therapists of their own sense of meaning and vocational purpose and to turn them into psychological technicians who tinker around with the dysfunctional mechanisms of the human mind. I was talking recently to a newly trained mental health professional (a new breed currently being groomed on twenty-six new courses in universities) who told me that on one of her placements she was given the task of sitting alongside a client at a computer to ensure that he correctly inserted a disc which would instruct him how to overcome depression. She also told me how counsellors working in the same practice were furious at her arrival in their midst because they saw her as a rival — and presumably a rival with a more effective armamentarium: God help all of us, I thought, if the work of therapists is soon to be replaced by the programmers of self-help discs or the writers of do it yourself manuals. Those whose lives are sacrificed in front of computer screens will soon, it seems, be able to remedy their dysfunctionality and their desperate loneliness by spending even more hours in front of their hypnotic, inhuman friends. Perhaps because it struck so much more close to home, I found myself almost as appalled at this student's account of the brave new world of mental health provision as I am when I am forced to confront the black clouds of global despair with which I began this talk. In such a world the question is not only how can our clients be expected to find meaning beyond the next shopping expedition or the next visit to the Costa del Sol but how do we as therapeutic practitioners continue to be sustained by a sense of meaning and purpose as we sit day by day with our clients in their confusion and despair?

The second half of this talk is based on hope – not on false optimism but on hope as the theological virtue which lies beyond despair.

About three years ago, I came across an article which had first appeared in 1980 in the journal 'Ephemerides Carmeliticae'. Somewhat to my astonishment I discovered that this article written by a Carmelite monk, Kevin Culligan, was attempting to fashion a contemporary model of spiritual direction based on a synthesis of the writings and experiences of the sixteenth century Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross, and those of Carl Rogers (Culligan, 1983). In a manner which I found persuasive Father Culligan drew illuminating parallels between John's exploration of the soul's journey into God and Rogers' description of the client's journey into self. Common to both journeys was the nature of the accompanying relationship between, in the one case, director and directee and, in the other, between therapist and client. Most startling, perhaps, was the apparent ease with which the writer moved from

the theological to the psychological worlds and back again without any sense of incongruity or incompatibility. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that the search for the deepest parts of the self and the yearning for intimacy with God should be seen as the same journey described in different languages. The comparison in both cases also manifested and embodied the same characteristics. In the case of the therapist these were described in terms of unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence whereas the spiritual director was motivated by the desire to 'put on Christ' and thus to become the channel for the expression of God's love.

As I reflected on this article and also on the powerful influence which Rogers had exerted on pastoral care practitioners throughout the 1970s, I was struck by the fact that all this had take place before the publication of 'A Way of Being' and some years in advance of Rogers' own admission that he had experienced and was continuing to experience moments both with individuals and in groups which warranted such adjectives as spiritual, mystical, transcendent. Father Culligan, it seemed, and many others had perceived in Rogers and his work a compelling relevance to their role as pastors and theologians long before Rogers himself was ready to employ a language which at least suggested some affinity between the two worlds.

If we move the clock forwards to our own day, I would suggest that the current context offers a number of characteristics which make this aspect of Rogers' legacy all the more significant - even, perhaps, to the extent of rendering it potentially the most telling of all his bequests to humanity. In the first place, the state of the world as I have suggested is even more dire than it was twenty years ago. Rogers devoted the best part of the last decade of his life to the pursuit of world peace, the diminishment of the nuclear threat and to cross-cultural understanding. Today, however, we live in a world where international terrorism is a source of daily atrocities, where the nuclear threat is reappearing in new guises, where the conflict between cultures is more marked than ever. Secondly, the ecological Armageddon which looms ahead as global warming becomes increasingly apparent and natural disasters proliferate has added an altogether more sinister aspect to what I have described as the black cloud of fear and despondency which seems to have descended upon us. In our own backyard of counselling and psychotherapy it is now a common report from many practitioners that clients are increasingly bringing concerns to the therapist's door which are essentially problems of meaning, purpose and value. Some clients employ the world 'spiritual' directly and unambiguously. In the face of such existential anguish neither sophisticated medication nor applied behaviourism in all its forms seem appropriate and are rarely efficacious. The recent vogue for positive psychology and the so-called science of well-being (much loved of late by some British politicians) are more directly responsive to the universal malaise and the latter at least acknowledges with refreshing candour that the spiritual dimension of well-being is central to human happiness.

At such a time the state of religion — particularly Christianity — in the western world presents a perplexing picture. The statistics provide irrefutable evidence that the institutional churches are in decline —

sometimes in rapid decline — throughout Europe, and even in America support is dwindling despite the outward appearance of a nation which remains God-fearing and where religion remains a potent force especially in the political sphere. At the same time as the gradual demise of the churches, however, there is much evidence that increasing numbers of people are reluctant to abandon belief in God or in some kind of higher power and are intent on pursuing their own spiritual journeys. This subjectivisation of spiritual experience is not infrequently allied to forms of alternative therapy and to the practice of meditation or the exploration of eastern traditions of spirituality. It is, for example, a common experience of those who run retreat centres and houses in Britain (often Catholic or Anglican religious) that their visitors are often neither church members nor even nominally Christian. They come because the environment offers them the space and the peace where they can go deep within themselves and find there the nourishment which they seek in the midst of frenetic lives. Interestingly, too, such people are keen to seek accompaniment from monks or nuns whose faith they do not share and whose churches they have no intention of joining. What matters, it seems, is to be assured of a relationship of caring attentiveness with someone for whom spiritual issues are deemed central to human existence.

The relevance of Rogers' legacy to the context 1 have just described is not difficult to discern. The person-centred emphasis on the supreme importance of subjective experience offers the encouragement for each individual to go deep within the self and not to be afraid of their unique truth. The centrality of the relationship between therapist and client offers a setting where it becomes safe to let go without fear of judgement and to discover that relational depth opens the door to transcendent experience. And most important of all, the experience of being received and welcomed by another person with complete generosity of spirit reveals something about the potential grandeur of the human-being. It is this aspect of Rogers' legacy which, I believe, may well constitute the key to the practice of spiritual accompaniment in the twenty-first century and it is to this theme that I wish to devote the rest of this talk.

In many theological circles whenever the name of Carl Rogers is invoked there are almost instinctive frowns of disapproval. Unlike the positive response of such people as Fr. Culligan who dared to suggest a fruitful partnership between Rogers and St John of the Cross, there are many in Christian circles who associate Rogers with what they see as a mistaken view of human nature and a refusal to acknowledge the power of evil and the prevalence of sin. Rogers' concept of the actualising tendency and his belief in the essential trustworthiness of human nature, once offered favourable conditions for growth, are seen as dangerously misguided. It is argued that such ideas lead to an arrogance where men and women see themselves as arbiters of their own destiny, demi-gods who are prepared to deny the very existence of a higher power. What is more, such arrogant naiveté quickly leads to disaster and gross disillusionment in the face of the evil which so clearly stalks the face of the earth. It also, by implication, denies humanity's need for redemption and renders the whole salvation process, for example, of the passion, death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ irrelevant and non-sensical.

These arguments — and they are as widespread today as they ever were — choose to ignore two highly relevant issues. They first of all ride roughshod over Rogers' admission — made explicit, for example, in his exchange of correspondence with Rollo May — that he did not believe he had found a satisfactory explanation for the presence of evil in the world. Secondly, they also choose to ignore the belief of much of Christendom that the passion, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ have restored humanity to its original state and that Christ — as the second Adam — is the prototype of what every human-being has it within his or her own capacity to become. In other-words, at the heart of one powerful strand of the Christian tradition there is as positive a view of human nature and its potential as anything that person-centred therapy can be seen to postulate. Where so often religion — and particularly Christianity — has failed, however, is in the communication of this good news to its adherents. Far from rejoicing in their own potential for goodness and their own participation in the divine energies, members of faith communities have so often seen themselves as somewhat abject creatures bound for perdition rather than for glory, more likely to be condemned than to be affirmed and celebrated. So ingrained is this tendency to self-denigration that it is hard to escape the conclusion that religion has not only demeaned humanity but has also been massively culpable in portraying God or the heart of the cosmos in colours that he, she or it would never recognise. God, in short, is portrayed as the judge, the destroyer, the angry one, the law imposer- the kill-joy rather than as the lover, the nourisher, the infinitely compassionate one, the creator who rejoices in all that is created.

Perhaps the full implications of Carl Rogers' legacy are now revealing their contemporary relevance. At the heart of person-centred therapy there is far more than a model of relationship which can be adapted to the practice of spiritual accompaniment. In the experience of the therapist-client relationship and of the process between them there lies a profound commentary on the nature of the human-being and on the nature of whatever it is that keeps the cosmos in being. The therapist mirrors, in however imperfect a way, the generous, acceptant, and sustaining power at the heart of the universe and the client embodies the potential inherent in every human-being born into the world. When these two can be fully present to each other then the mystical and transcendent fusion between them opens up vistas which we scarcely dare to imagine. And if you think this is excessively hyperbolic let me recall the words of that down-to-earth, empirical scientist and phenomenologist Carl Rogers, who in 1980 could write:

'What I have been saying is that in our work as person-centered therapists and facilitators, we have discovered the attitudinal qualities that are demonstrably effective in releasing constructive and growthful changes in the personality and behaviour of individuals. Persons in an environment infused with these attitudes develop more sell-understanding, more self-confidence, more ability to choose their behaviors. They learn more

significantly, they have more freedom to be and become.

The individual in this nurturing climate is free to choose *any* direction, but actually selects positive and constructive ways. The actualizing tendency is operative in the human being.

It is still further confirming to find that this is not simply a tendency in living systems but is part of a strong formative tendency in our universe, which is evident at all levels.

Thus, when we provide a psychological climate that permits persons to *be* — whether they are clients, students, workers, or persons in a group — we are not involved in a chance event. We are tapping into a tendency which permeates all of organic life — a tendency to become all the complexity of which the organism is capable. And on an even larger scale, I believe we are tuning in to a potent creative tendency which has formed our universe, from the smallest snowflake to the largest galaxy, from the lowly amoeba to the most sensitive and gifted of persons. And perhaps we are touching the cutting edge of our ability to transcend ourselves, to create new and more spiritual directions in human evolution.

This kind of formulation is, for me, a philosophical base for a person-centered approach. It justifies me in engaging in a life-affirming way of being.' (Rogers, 1980:133-34).

These words of Rogers are uttered by a prophetic voice which expresses hope and confidence in the ability of humankind to transcend its limitations and to move into a different future. Nor are they an idealistic whistling in the wind. Rogers writes in full consciousness of his own experience and of the discoveries of leading scientists of his time. His is a hopefulness based on a realistic appraisal of humanity's capacity to move beyond its present predicament. His experience as a therapist and as a group facilitator convinces him that men and women are capable of great things. Their greatness lies pre-eminently in their capacity to offer each other an empathic responsiveness and a level of cherishing acceptance which are transformative for both giver and receiver. This, I would suggest, is a message which the world needs desperately to hear at what may be the eleventh hour. As a species we need to believe in our inherent greatness not in terms of our cleverness or creative ingenuity, important as these may be, but in terms of our ability to cherish and honour our differences and of our capacity to overcome self-preoccupation in the interests of the other and of the good of the wider community.

Kevin Culligan as a Carmelite was perhaps predictably excited at the prospect of an alliance between Rogers and John of the Cross. In my own quest for appropriate companions in the task of sustaining the hope that Rogers embodies throughout his life but more especially in the final years, I have discovered two women who for me have become an abiding inspiration. In partnership with Rogers they constitute a formidable trio and in such company it is possible not to capitulate to despair. The first lived in my own home city six hundred years ago. Like Rogers she had a deep and unshakeable trust in her own experience and as a result discovered that at the heart of creation is a God who is all-loving and infinitely compassionate. In the visions of Julian

of Norwich there is no trace of a punishing, judgmental and angry God. On the contrary the God whom Julian encounters does not forgive because he has never accused in the first place. What is more, human beings are his darlings, the crown of his creation and they are made so that they share in the divine nature. With Rogers, Julian rejoices in the potential greatness of humankind and this despite the manifest evidence of human destructiveness and the ravages of sin. She does not profess to understand how this can be and concludes that sin is 'behovely', it has to be. She knows, too, that she will not be overcome. To understand evil is beyond her: her task is to ensure that evil does not defeat her.

My second companion is a young Jewess who died at the hands of the Nazi regime in Auschwitz. Etty Hillesum lived in Amsterdam during the German occupation and from 1941 to 1943 she kept an amazing diary which is rapidly proving itself to be a spiritual classic of profound contemporary significance. Etty lived through one of the darkest periods in recent history. She witnessed and experienced the barbaric policies which resulted in the cold-blooded murder of millions. Her personal suffering was unspeakable and yet, astonishingly, in the midst of rampant evil, she found peace, discovered beauty and was liberated into offering an intense compassion which illuminated all those she encountered. Etty shows that a human being can reach her full stature and display unbounded love, courage and wonder at the beauty of creation not in spite of pain and horror but through the very suffering she endured.

The voices of these two women complement and undergird for me the hope that infuses Rogers' work. In their different ways they confirm the resilience of the actualising tendency, give added credibility to the notion of a formative tendency at the heart of the cosmos and point to the power of relationship to open the path to transcendence. I suppose if I am fully honest I fear that the age of counselling and psychotherapy is coming to an end because therapy as we have known it can no longer address the profound spiritual crises that confront us as a species. In the company of Carl Rogers, Julian of Norwich and Etty Hillesum, however, I can glimpse a new humanity and hold fast to Rogers' hope that we can indeed transcend ourselves and still have a future.

Julian speaks of the nature of God and of his relationship to humankind:

'For us it was a great marvel, constantly shown to the soul in all the revelations, and the soul was contemplating with great diligence that our Lord God cannot in his own judgment forgive, because he cannot be angry — that would be impossible. For this was revealed, that our life is all founded and rooted in love, and without love we cannot live' (49th Chapter Showing: Revelations of Divine Love, Long Text)

Etty Hillesum writes in her diary on 9th October 1942 as the Gestapo close in and the fate of the Jewish population is sealed:

'Is it very arrogant of me to say that I have too much love in me to give it all to just one person? The idea that one can love one person and one person only one's whole life long strikes me as quite childish. There is something mean and impoverishing about it. Will people never learn that love brings so much

more happiness and reward than sex.' (Hillesum 1983: 193)

Julian in her insistence on the totally accepting and compassionate presence at the heart of the universe and Etty in her living out of the truth that pain, suffering and unimaginable evil can neither prevent nor deny the essential wonder of the human being reveal the possibility of a new order. Theirs is a world which Rogers sometimes glimpsed and to which person-centred therapists and their clients continue intermittently to gain access. The trouble is that most of, us seem reluctant or too embarrassed to admit it. Sadly, it would seem that reluctance and embarrassment are luxuries we can no longer afford.

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