

' . . . but she *said* she didn't  
mind!'

I always want you to do what you want to do

I give you permission to do what you want to do

I can tolerate you to do what you want to do

I don't really like you doing what you want to do

I definitely don't want you to do what you want

I shall slam the door and leave you if you . . . .

I think you are inconsiderate and selfish and  
horrid if you do what . . . .

you are a nasty bastard . . . .

Hans Lobstein

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John Rowan

## **Is the Human Potential Movements Narcissistic?**

One of the things we are often accused of is being too self-indulgent. John Southgate once said that AHP really stood for the Association of Hedonistic Pursuits (hedonism is the philosophy of personal pleasure). It's an accusation which I believe deserves an answer. It really can give offence to political people, or to people with severe practical problems, when they see people

paying £20 for a weekend with some such title as *Turning Inwards*, or *Loving Your Body* or *Integrative Holistic Macrosynthesis*. So what is the answer we can give?

The first step is obviously to get clear what we are talking about. There seem to be six things which are worth distinguishing: Self-love; Egotism: Selfishness (exclusive); Selfishness (inclusive); Self-improvement; and Self-actualization.

**SELF-LOVE** This is a general feeling of being convinced of one's own worth. It is also often called self-esteem, self-respect or having a good self-image or self-concept. This is a healthy thing, and most people in the helping professions would be only too pleased if their clients had more of it. It is one of the things which is aimed at by Rogerians when they aim at reducing the difference between the present self-image and the ideal self-image; by Gestaltists when they aim at enabling people to give more love to themselves; by TA people when they aim at putting people in touch with their internal positive nurturing parent; by psychosynthesis people when they aim at putting people in touch with the Transpersonal Self. In all these instances, it is felt to be very desirable to help people to see that they don't need to be addicted to sucking love off other people. If they can give more love to themselves, they are better able to give it to others, and to accept it from others in a genuine way which does not feel like a burden and a danger. So this is an important one, and a very positive one. Insofar as we are teaching or facilitating this kind of self-love, we are doing something of value.

**EGOTISM** This is a general feeling of being convinced of one's own pre-eminence. It has a lot to do with pride, with an inflated self-image, with a kind of self-importance. It really seems as though no one in the world is quite as deserving of attention as me. There is usually a great deal of defensiveness about it, though it comes across more as smugness and self-satisfaction. When well-meaning people go in for ego-boosting, for telling their children - "You are better than the rest - you should be coming top", or telling their husbands - "You should have got that promotion, you're better than the person who got it" - they are feeding egotism rather than self-love. Egotism always sees things in terms of better and worse, self-love does not. There is always something edgy about egotism - it is always having to prove itself all over again. This is not something which anyone in the growth movement is trying to foster, and Karen Horney in particular is very clear about what she calls the Pride System and its dangers.

**SELFISHNESS (EXCLUSIVE)** This is looking after one's own self-interest with blinkers on. This kind of selfishness can only see what is straight in front of it. It is as if the rest of the world somehow did not exist. It is impulsive - if I feel a feeling, I have to express it straight away, without any consideration for the circumstances. If I want something, I have to have it now, without considering any other priorities. If we define rationality as taking account of all those values of mine which are relevant to a situation, then this kind of selfishness is irrational. This is not something which is encouraged by

any form of therapy known to me - in fact, they would all try to help the person exhibiting this to change in some way. Sometimes some people think that the feeling therapies foster this, but this is because they haven't been into the feeling therapies themselves. It is a false belief.

**SELFISHNESS (INCLUSIVE)** This is looking after one's own self-interest without blinkers, letting everything from inside and from outside. It means going after what I really want, but with complete openness to experience. At my best, I am in touch with all my relevant feelings and all my relevant values and all the relevant information, and I can then act spontaneously in whatever situation I find myself. This kind of spontaneity is the most rational action of which I am capable. I don't deny my interests, my needs, my wishes or my fantasies, but take all of them into account - rather than focussing on just one and pursuing that. (From this point of view, we can see that the "rational economic man" of the economist is in fact highly irrational, because he is only taking into account one value, and setting all the others aside!). Every kind of therapy or counselling I know helps people to move in the direction of this inclusive kind of selfishness, and I think this is highly defensible and thoroughly OK. The world would be a better place if there were more of this open and all-embracing selfishness around.

**SELF-IMPROVEMENT** This is about the attainment of long-range goals. It has to do with good self-management. How do I set goals for myself? How do I get the rewards I want to get? How do I avoid the traps I want to avoid? How do I acquire the skills I need to acquire? How can I be a good friend to myself? How can I make best use of my time? This is a tricky area, because it can easily degenerate into a kind of self-separation, where one part of me is trying to improve another part of me - leading possibly to an unhealthy split in the personality. But if this can be avoided, self-improvement obviously makes sense at a common-sense level. Certainly someone who has been agoraphobic for 20 years, and starts to come out of it, would be welladvised to go in for careful self-management, so as not to ask for trouble. John Heron says that it makes sense to talk of "the directing self" as setting up projects - "I must go on that workshop", "I could take that course", "Read that book" and so on. But there are certainly defensible and indefensible forms of self-improvement, and this is something which can do with careful scrutiny. If someone improves so as to be a better slavedriver, that would be a bad thing in my book. But on the whole, I think the human potential movement is a lot better in this area than a lot of other people one might go to in a search for self-improvement.

**SELF-ACTUALIZATION** This is being all that I have it in me to be - being that self which I truly am. It is generally seen as a process of emergence - when I have done enough work on myself, I will get in touch with my real self, without having to search for it in any specific way. And there is something deeply paradoxical about this whole thing. As one approaches self-actualization, one leaves the realm of Deficiency, and enters the realm of Being. So the self, which to most of us still means something limited to me and my interests and my needs, is now seen in quite a different light. It is not about my deficien-

cies, my needs, my addictions, my hangups - it is about Being. Suddenly the whole universe opens up, and I have to recognise that that is me. I am not a narrow, petty, history-bound, conditioned thing, but a self-transcendent being, who doesn't have to think any more in terms of fixed categories. And yet, of course, at the same time, I don't actually stop being narrow, petty, history-bound and conditioned, etc. This is the paradox. And it's hard to understand, because we keep on trying to understand it in Deficiency terms, in Deficiency language, with Deficiency logic. And as long as we haven't personally experienced self-actualization, we are bound to go on doing this - we have little alternative. But most of us have in fact experienced self-actualization, in those precious moments known as peak experiences. And if you can remember how the world seemed then, you have some good clues about how to cope with paradox this or any other. The peak experience, as Maslow has said, is a good indication of what self-actualization is all about.

Now obviously there are dangers here. As Maslow himself pointed out, we can start going after peak experiences in a programmed way which is basically deficiency-oriented, and also basically self-defeating. We can go to workshop after workshop and expect something to be handed to us. But this is another paradox: self-actualization is easy and natural - we can be surprised by joy - and yet quite a lot of work and commitment seems to be necessary in practice before we can get to the point where we are really ready to allow it to happen, and to accept it and own it as ours.

**CONCLUSION** To sum up, then, what I have been trying to suggest is that the human potential movement is certainly concerned with focussing attention of the self. But far from being self-indulgent or narcissistic, it is fostering something which is socially defensible and politically desirable.

Because, as Carl Rogers has been pointing out recently, this kind of work gives people a sense of their personal power. It gives people the strength they need in order to start running their own lives. And if at present this is mainly for the benefit of middle-class people, who are supposed to be well able to look after their own lives anyway (though of course they are not), the answer to this is not to stop doing it with such people, but to extend it and do it with more people.

There are various ways of doing this. Rogers' way is to hold large meetings (anything up to 800 people) where people can discover that they are not powerless after all. Paulo Freire's way is to teach literacy in a way which puts people in touch with their own position as political beings. My own way is to teach the method of the Barefoot Psychoanalyst, and to try to get the book more widely distributed and known.

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