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How Humanistic Psychology Has Changed My Life

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In the late 1970s, when I was training as a teacher I remember reading an article by someone called Rogers. It spoke about the classroom as a place where one could have a relationship with children that was based on honesty and mutuality, rather than authority. That article made a big impression on me, even though I had no idea who the author was. In fact, it is the only article I remember from my training days, and it deeply affected the way I approached my work during my short time working in schools. Surprisingly, when, ten years later, I began another training course, this time in counselling, I did not immediately connect that article with the work of the psychologist and humanistic counsellor, Dr Carl Rogers, in whose approach I was now becoming immersed. Only gradually did the penny drop – that in fact this same man had profoundly influenced both my educational and my therapeutic trainings.

Carl Rogers was first and foremost an advocate of relationship. His interest in achieving meaningful, honest encounter with those with whom he engaged in the different arenas of his working life has continued to inspire me as I have moved through the fields of psychotherapy, education, community development and environmental therapies. Like Rogers, I grew up in a world still influenced by values inherited from earlier times. In their positive incarnations, the post-war legacy of idealism was tinged with remnants of empire and paternalism, which emphasized caring, personal responsibility and duty to the vulnerable in the community. The wealthy and entitled had long been expected to support the poor, the disadvantaged and the refugee through generosity; and in Britain, this happened increasingly through the taxation system. The welfare state was still in my childhood the unassailable foundation on which everyone could rely in every misfortune.

The heady days of the 1970s and 80s turned ideas of duty and responsibility on their head. The growing movement of self-enquiry and experimentation which characterized the 'me' generation blew me into an alternative world of community projects, women's consciousness, encounter groups and an intense search for authenticity. It was during that time that I discovered Humanistic Psychology in the particular form of a radically person-centred training programme, and embraced changes in my personal and working life which took me out of a relatively conventional wifely role into an exciting phase of study, running workshops, becoming a therapist and eventually training others as counsellors and therapists. And along the way I became Buddhist.

Each movement gives birth to the new. Humanistic Psychology grew out of the foundations established by the early pioneers of psychoanalysis and behaviourism; a 'third wave' which recognized the importance of the humanity of those at the centre of the therapeutic process. Under its influence, humanistic values infiltrated not only therapeutic work, but also many other fields of human activity – including education, social planning and even the advertising industry, affecting society in ways, both positive and negative, which its forefathers, with their interest in encounter and authenticity, never foresaw. In the process, different streams emerged within the movement.

On the one hand, Humanistic Psychology has made us more aware and more open to one another, less trapped in preconceptions and prejudices. It provided a psychology based on genuineness in communication. On the other hand, humanistic values have tended to support human-centric perspectives, and, in reacting against the duty culture, have emphasized personal satisfaction and fulfilment above responsibility to others. The individual became the unit of interest, and the satisfaction of personal goals the focus of much humanistic therapy.

Over the years, my own main focus has been in developing a Buddhist approach to psychotherapy, and latterly in linking this to the fields of ecopsychology and ecotherapy. In this, Buddhism goes hand in hand with the humanistic emphasis on relationship. Buddhist psychology is other-related, seeing the self as a trap in which we imprison ourselves through our clinging to identity-supporting views which are often outmoded and stale. More dangerously, preoccupation with a constructed self and the perspectives which support it stops us seeing clearly what is, or employing the dual wings of wisdom and compassion in our interactions with others.

For all its faults, the world of our parents and grandparents built structures to care for the disadvantaged and recognized the duty of the privileged to serve society as a whole. In current times, with global events taking ugly turns on many fronts, we can no longer embed ourselves in the psychological isolationism of the 'me'-focused approach. A different value-based perspective is needed.

I am not alone in my concerns. In my consulting room clients increasingly talk about their anxiety about the world which we inhabit. Ordinary people, particularly the young, are deeply affected by world events and look to the future with trepidation. The despair they bring is centred on feelings of powerlessness; not in the face of social injunction or parental disapproval, but in seeing the wilful destruction of the most basic resources of life on our planet. As climate change disappears from the White House web site and Palmyra crumbles before bulldozers and bombs, displaced peoples are held back by razor-wire fences and drown in the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean: their future and that of all our children looks bleak, and their despair is collective and profound.

At its core, Humanistic Psychology is concerned with encounter. By meeting others, whether human or non-human, we celebrate life in all its richness, and recognize and appreciate the need for limitations on our profligacy. As the ecopsychology movement, gaining strength over the past few decades, challenges the focus on the individual and demands that the therapeutic profession takes account of our place as part of an ecosystem groaning under the weight of human-centredness, as humanistic therapists we can celebrate the open-hearted respect which our founders espoused, and recognize that, rather than owing us favours, the universe is generous to us in so many ways that we can only, in all fairness, restrain our impulses to over-consume.

Caroline Brazier is a psychotherapist and supervisor, and course leader of the Tariki Psychotherapy Training Programme in the Other-Centred Approach and the Ten Directions Programme in Ecotherapy. Author of a number of books on Buddhism and psychotherapy, including *Buddhist Psychology* (Constable and Robinson, 2003) and *Other-Centred Therapy* (O-Books, 2009), and many articles and papers, Caroline teaches and runs workshops internationally. She is based in the Tariki Buddhist community, Narborough, Leicestershire (www.buddhistpsychology.info).

Editor's note: We're delighted to introduce this exciting new series on how HP has influenced our lives with this excellent contribution by Caroline Brazier. If you would like to write a piece for this series (max length 1,000 words), please contact me at richardahouse@hotmail.com