

How Humanistic Psychology Has Changed My Life

By Lucy Scurfield

Humanistic Psychology has shown me the importance of relationship in the process of developing my sense of self. It has helped me to recognize and appreciate life-affirming experiences, and has enabled me to develop fulfilling work. In this process I have come to appreciate the importance of my own creativity and of taking responsibility for my own life and my part in the evolution of the world around me.

In my formative years I had no sense of my own importance, self-worth and value. I recall feeling frustrated, and at times lonely. I also had moments of enjoying life and felt interested in the world, but it never occurred to me that what I felt, thought and experienced was significant and mattered.

I grew up in the divided city of Cambridge. From the age of four I lived a short distance from the colleges and the city centre. However, I failed the 11-plus exam and attended a secondary modern school in a deprived part of the city. From that time I felt that I didn't belong anywhere. I left school with the equivalent of passes in 5 O-levels. In 1966, when I was 16, my family moved to Norfolk where my formal education continued, but I doubted my ability and believed that people who went to university had a secret I didn't share.

I lived for a time in London, where eventually I found work as an assistant gardener and developed a business as a garden designer. In

1991 I tried to move to Norwich. Whilst continuing to work in London I undertook a tour guide course at the Sainsbury Centre at the University of East Anglia (UEA). This spurred me, in my forties, into becoming a mature part-time art history student, but I felt self-conscious and knew something was troubling me. I became aware of the free counselling service, provided by trainees on the UEA Person-Centred course. Having had an unsatisfactory experience in the past I was wary, but eventually settled with one counsellor. It was the first time that I experienced the undivided attention of someone listening to me. It was enough to be listened to with absolute focus.

I decided I wanted to be a counsellor myself, but was told that Norwich was 'flooded with therapists'. So I thought I'd be a horticultural therapist without a clue as to what that meant. So I sought out voluntary work in horticultural settings in Norwich. This led me to the idea of setting up a therapeutic garden project in which people could be however they are, and be able to talk and/or do gardening if they wished to do so. It would be non-prescriptive.

The UEA was a good starting point for training with a certificate in group work, followed by an Introduction to Counselling Skills course. Both brought me an awareness that in any group, the unique experiences and perspectives of every individual are all important and valid. I also started to recognize that my feelings and thoughts were important, and worthy of exploration.

The next step was a training in Integrative Counselling at Matrix College in Norwich. Importantly I could be myself and develop my own philosophy and approach. A condition of the course was to have personal therapy, which I welcomed. The college is a member of UKCP (United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy).

Whilst training I joined two colleagues from the Refugee Orientation Project of the British Red Cross in Norwich and started a garden project. Two adjoining allotments were found. My two colleagues left Norwich the same year, 2004, and I continued with the project which would eventually become 'Strong Roots'. This name came to me from my experience and my understanding that just as plants can withstand difficulties with a strong foundation, so too can people. The project aims to provide a place that facilitates well-being for anyone, including those who are socially isolated; it offers psychological therapy in a garden setting. The informal natural setting is calming and, for some, talking is easier than in a clinical setting, and confidentiality is more assured than in a building where voices might be heard through the walls.

My own developing self-awareness enables me to do this work. My continuing personal development includes participation in the Independent Practitioners Network (IPN) to which I was introduced by Jill Hall, who suggested I attend the 15th anniversary event in London in 2009. As a consequence of this I was invited to join the Leonard Piper IPN Group – a member group of IPN. In 2014 I started meeting, once a month for four hours, with a group in Norwich – Easterlies – which I find to be very challenging and supportive. We are all committed to IPN, which is based on face-to-face encounter for support, challenge and civic accountability.

I also attend Jill Hall's monthly weekend groups where individuals are entirely accepted for who and how they are. These experiences show me the importance of other people to my own personal development. It takes me by surprise to find that others are receptive to me when I am truly myself! The experience of being received, accepted and understood, even when I have gone to what I

perceive as being the limit of what I fear anyone else might find acceptable, is life affirming. It is a relief to find that I am welcome with all my difficult behaviours, and helpful to understand that these arise out of my distress and that I can have compassion for myself. Indeed, if I want to be receptive to and accept others, then I need to be receptive to and accepting of myself.

I find a sense of release in my work. I love the feeling of being focused on another and of hearing an individual's unique experience. It teaches me compassion and tolerance both towards others and to myself.

Recently I have de-registered from UKCP, as the organization is remote and separate from me, and has no idea of who I am and of how I work. My engagement with Easterlies and IPN provides a quality of support and challenge which, with all its flaws and weaknesses, goes way beyond anything provided by UKCP which, I have found, is just a box-ticking exercise, and certainly does not reflect the life-affirming experiences I have experienced in the field of Humanistic Psychology.

I find my own creativity, which includes singing, drawing, writing and classical guitar, to be very nourishing. I believe individual expression is very important in personal individual development as well as in relation to others. As long as I continue to develop my sense of self, I will be able to engage with the world and allow an expression of my being in a constructive relational way.

About the contributor

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