

**Person-centred therapy and the mindful, I-Thou, mystical/spiritual dimension:  
the multi-level nature of relational depth and mental distress**

**Person-Centred Quarterly, November 2009**

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The superlative psychotherapist is a mystic; or at least someone able to relate to their clients in a mystical manner. This is the message bequeathed to us by Carl Rogers, originator of person-centred therapy. 'Profound growth and healing and energy are present', Rogers declares, when therapists operate in the 'transcendent, the indescribable...mystical, spiritual dimension' (1980: 129-130).

Rogers explicates the superlative therapist's mystical way of being by employing concepts from two different philosophical traditions. He utilises, on the one hand, the tradition of existentialism, specifically the dialogical encounter philosophy of Martin Buber. Writing from this perspective and addressing what he terms the 'complete' or 'almost mystical subjectivity of myself as therapist', Rogers posits that

the essence of therapy at some of the deepest parts of therapy seems to be a unity of experiencing....When there is this complete unity, singleness, fullness of experiencing in the relationship, then it acquires the 'out-of-this-world' quality..., a sort of trance-like feeling in the relationship.... In these moments there is, to borrow Buber's phrase, a real 'I-Thou' relationship, a timeless living in the experience which is *between* the client and me. It is at the opposite end from seeing the client, or myself as an object. It is the height of personal subjectivity. (1967: 200, 202)

The other philosophical tradition that Rogers calls upon to make sense of therapist mystical subjectivity is one that construes the whole cosmos, including the human being, as a unitary yet evolving matrix of rhythmically vibrating patterned activity. In this tradition human beings are seen as *organisms*, organised fields of evolving processes embedded in a similarly evolving overarching field. Within this perspective, in Rogers' words, 'nature is clearly process' such that the world is 'a world that consists only of vibrating energy, a world with no solid base, a world of process and change' (1963: 19, 1980: 352). Various terms *holistic, organismic, process*, this perspective is inherent within today's natural science: the science of Darwin, Einstein, and Planck.

From this organismic viewpoint, Rogers characterises the person who relates in a mystical manner as *fully functioning*. He or she is said to exemplify optimal personal growth; and to do so not only with respect to the biological realm, where an *actualising tendency* provides the impetus, but in relation to the evolution of the entire cosmos, as powered, in Rogers' eyes, by the meta-growth principle of the *formative tendency*--of which the actualising tendency 'is part' (1980: 134). For, grounded upon the observation that throughout the cosmos 'every form that we see or know emerged from a simpler, less complex form', Rogers proposes that 'a creative, not a disintegrative process, is at work' engendered by a 'whole-making', 'holistic force': 'a strong formative ['directional'] tendency in our universe, which is evident at all levels' (ibid: 125, 113, 134).

Viewed in organismic terms, therefore, full appreciation of the character of the fully functioning person involves locating her or him in the cosmic context of the workings of the formative tendency. So conceived, the fully functioning person represents for Rogers the advance guard of the evolutionary development of human consciousness. He or she is someone who ‘feels at one with the cosmos’; someone who enjoys ‘a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind’; someone whose consciousness floats ‘in a direction consonant with the directional evolutionary flow’; someone thereby involved in creating ‘new and more spiritual directions in human evolution’ (ibid: 129, 128, 134).

Focusing upon the practice of psychotherapy in relation to this cosmic connection, Rogers describes how the fully functioning therapist’s mystical apprehension of the client involves a ‘sensitive, empathic, concentrated listening’, a fulsome resonating with the client ‘at all levels’: a ‘total organismic sensitivity’ or ‘hearing’ whereby, says Rogers (speaking of his own experience), ‘hidden in all of the personal communications which I really hear there seem to be orderly psychological laws, aspects of the same order we find in the universe as a whole’ (ibid: 9-8; 1967: 202). Which is to say that ‘beyond the immediate message of the person there is the universal’ (1980: 8): the creative working of the formative actualising tendency.

In recent years, interest in Rogers’ characterisation of the superlative therapist as mystic has resulted in significant development (by Mick Cooper, Dave Mearns and Peter Schmid) of that strand of Rogers’ thought associated with Buber’s dialogical existentialism. Especially important, in this regard, is Mearns’ formulation of ‘meeting at *relational depth*’: ‘a state of profound contact and engagement between two people, in which each person is fully real with the Other, and able to understand and value the Other’s experiences at a high level’ (Mearns & Cooper, 2005: xii).

In what follows, I suggest how this dialogical development might be enhanced through augmenting the organismic strand of Rogers’ theorizing.

### **Multi-level resonance and dissonance**

Elaborating further upon the I-Thou therapist-client relationship, Rogers writes that

When I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me then...it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. (1980: 129)

In such moments, he elsewhere elucidates, ‘I am able to sense with a good deal of clarity the way his [sic] experience seems to him, really viewing it from within him, and yet without losing my own personhood or separateness in that’ (1990: 48).

These passages are representative, in my view, of what Buber calls ‘the unity of contraries...at the innermost core of the dialogue’, (1948:17)--dialogue, for Buber, being the I-Thou ‘meeting’ or encounter created in the realm ‘between’ therapist and client when the therapist interrelates in terms of personal wholeness. Comparable to

Rogers speaking of ‘my total organismic sensitivity’, Buber refers to hearing ‘with every pore of my body’ (1961: 19).

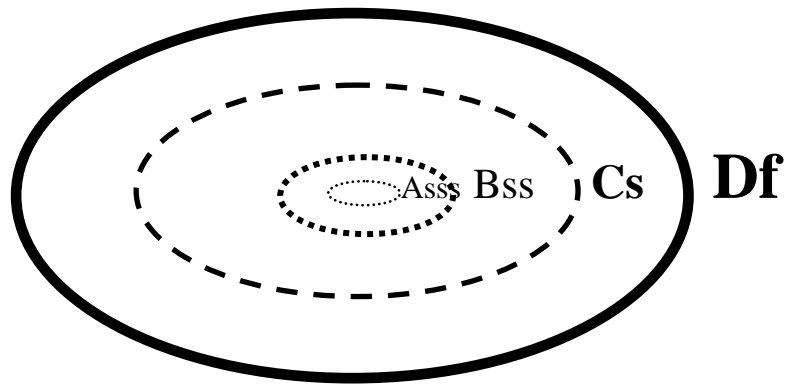
Two analogies are instructive here: the first is the cosmic *yin-yang* symbol of Chinese Taoism: ☯; the second a handshake. In each case, like the encounter of therapist and client, two separate entities--the black and white ‘tadpoles’; two different individuals’ hands--come together to create a greater whole, even as we recognise the continuing existence of the individual entities.

Viewed from such a before-after perspective, we can combine the Buberian and organismic strands of Rogers’ thinking on the basis of two less complex wholes forming a more complex, ‘higher level’ whole. Hegel’s dialectic of *thesis*, *synthesis*, *antithesis* provides a universal characterisation of this creative procedure; while Piaget’s characterisation of *assimilation* and *accommodation* furnishes a comparable interpretation of children’s’ cognitive development. Such thinkers make explicit (a) how Rogers’ formative actualising tendency requires further definition in dialectical, *yin-yang* terms; (b) how, when thinking of an ongoing and unceasing creative process—viz., the workings of Rogers’ formative tendency—such a dialectic engenders a multi-level structure wherein a whole at the lower level becomes part of the higher.

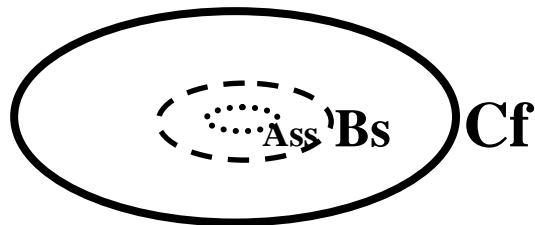
If, for instance, several individuals shake hands on a right to left basis and while maintaining their grasp form a circle, a third level beyond the level of individual hands and the level of handshakes becomes created. Adding to these three levels more complex wholes than circles or less complex wholes than hands (e.g. fingers) shows how organismic theorists, like Piaget, come to conceive the cosmos and all beings in multi-level terms. Arthur Koestler, for instance, posits a hierarchy of *holons*, while Michael Polanyi presents ‘a picture of the universe filled with strata of reality joined meaningfully together in pairs of higher and lower strata’ involving ‘a stratified structure to living beings, which will include the structure of consciousness in higher animals’ (1966: 35, 1965: 211).

Both the cosmos and ourselves, that is, are constructed like a nested set of Russian dolls. Within the larger whole lie all the less complex subsidiary wholes, wholes comprised, say organismic thinkers, of patterns of activity (types of process)--(see Ellingham, 2002 & 2005 for a graphic illustration). Like the rhythmical and harmonious vibration of strings of a musical instrument, there exist ‘gradations of rhythm’ in which ‘the more perfect rhythm is built upon component rhythms’ (Whitehead, 1982: 198).

**TIME 4**



**TIME 3**



**TIME 2**



**TIME 1**



*The  
Formative  
Actualizing  
Tendency*

Forms: A (e.g., finger), B (e.g., hand),  
C (e.g. handshake), D (e.g. circle)

f = focal

s = subsidiary, ss = sub-subsubsidiary, sss = sub-sub-subsubsidiary.

**General Representation of the Workings of the Formative Actualising Tendency  
from Time 1 till Time 4**

(Adapted from Ellingham, 2002 & 2005)

Beyond congruence of vibrational pattern, however, mystical traditions affirm the concrete experiencing of our oneness with the cosmos on a micro-macro basis. Polanyi clarifies the nature of this concrete connection. Relative to 'the hierarchy of levels found in living beings', he declares, 'we can see all the levels of evolution at a glance in an individual human being' (1966: 36).

Here a bridge with Buber's I-Thou philosophy is the realisation that I-Thou knowing is the hallmark of 'inclusive mysticism' (Lash, 1988), 'a concrete mysticism of hallowing the everyday' (Friedman, 2002: 337), and thereby on a par with Buddhist 'mindfulness', Freud's free-floating attention, and Maslow's 'high plateau of Unitive consciousness': that sphere glimpsed in 'peak experiences' that is characterised by 'the ability to simultaneously perceive in the fact--the *is*--its particularity, *and* its universality....both the sacred and the profane' (Maslow, 1971: 336 & 111). 'Every good therapist', explains Maslow, 'must have this kind of unitive perception....must be able to perceive both the sacred and profane aspects of a person' (p. 336).

In Buber's terminology, apprehending the world and others in a profane, everyday way is apprehension in the I-It mode, i.e. as separate objects. When, though, we superimpose I-Thou knowing upon the I-It, we apprehend that I-It object as it really is, interrelated with all other aspects of reality in terms of its 'Thou-ness'. Thus two important facts about I-Thou knowing are:

- (a) that in our development from childhood such knowing arises within the ambient of the mother-child relationship and is the initial mode by which we come to know ourselves, inseparably interrelated to the world and others. Thereafter, mainly through the mediation of language, the I-It mode develops out of the I-Thou mode.
- (b) that 'the Thou of I-Thou knowing is not limited to men [and women] but may include animals, trees, objects of nature' (Friedman, 2002: 65) - 'an animal, a plant, a stone', as Buber puts it (1961: 27).

On the one hand, then, we have the picture of ourselves as multi-level patterns of activity comprised of the same patterns of activity as other people, animals, plants and stones; on the other, that when employing our 'total organismic sensitivity', our I-Thou mode of apprehending in tandem with our I-It mode, we empathically apprehend ourselves as one with other people, animals, plants and stones. Positing that the mystic's sense of oneness with others and the world comes about through empathic resonance between the different patterns of activity that comprise ourselves and those same patterns in the evolved reality surrounding us fits with Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism, a philosophy in which such an evolutionary gradation of sensibilities and sense-making is propounded.

Rogers' premise and that of mystical traditions is that to enjoy such total organism, resonant I-Thou knowing requires personal integration/congruence, resonance among the hierarchy of levels that comprise us (see Ellingham, 2005).

What, though, where instead of within-organism resonance there exists pronounced dissonance, as found in that form of mental distress labelled 'schizophrenia'? Of such distress Erik Erikson declares that

where schizophrenic processes take over, the rock-bottom attitude is expressed in evolutionary imagery. Total feeling becomes de-humanized, and eventually de-mammalized. These patients can feel like a crab or a shellfish or a mollusc, or even abandon what life and movement there is on the lowest animal level and become a lonely twisted tree on the ledge of a stormy rock, or the rock, or the ledge out in nowhere. (1972: 99)

The 'schizophrenic experience', R. D. Laing further informs, involves a 'journey...experienced as going further "in", as going back through one's personal life, in and back through and through and beyond into the experience of mankind, of primal man,...and perhaps even further into the being of animals, vegetables and minerals' (1967: 104).

Mystics relax everyday I-It dominated consciousness to activate evolutionary sensibilities beyond the edge of that awareness. Thereby they sense I-Thou oneness with the cosmos at all levels without losing the I-It sense of self or 'as-if', without being overwhelmed by hitherto unconscious processes. Top-down resonance controls bottom-up dissonance tempering stone-like 'catatonia', plant-like waxy flexibility, 'animal' behaviour, mythological imaginings. 'The mystic...enters the waters and finds he can swim; whereas the schizophrenic...is drowning' (Campbell, 1972: 209). Able to 'float in a direction consonant with the evolutionary flow' (Rogers, 1980: 128), mystics successfully regulate affective psychotic dissonance both in themselves and in others. The mystic is a superlative psychotherapist.

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