

Meeting Carl (and Bill--and not forgetting Gene)
PCQ
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The one time I met Carl Rogers was in the summer of 1981 when I attended a conference at the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California. The conference was organized by William R. (Bill) Coulson, at that time a close colleague of Rogers.

I had previously met Bill in 1977 when I had been a participant and he had been one of the facilitators on the La Jolla Program, an encounter group experience held in La Jolla on the campus of the University of California at San Diego (UCSD). During the encounter experience I got to know Bill as a compassionate and caring individual, a relational depth yet fun loving person who had not only fathered seven children--to some a remarkable feat in itself--but someone who more remarkably had honed the musical skills of his offspring to the point that they had performed on national TV as a family jazz band.

Following my personal encounter with Bill and his trombone in 1977, I subsequently discovered that he had quite an intellectual pedigree: not only did he possess two PhDs, one in philosophy and one in counselling psychology, but he had published an impressive book on encounter groups entitled *Groups, Gimmicks and Instant Gurus*. I also learned that in 1966 he and Rogers had organized a conference on the nature of science, a conference at which Jakob Bronowski and Michael Polanyi had presented papers. I found out about this when I came across the book of papers from that conference, *Man and the Science of Man*, which he had co-edited with Rogers.

Notwithstanding my interest in meeting Bill again, what attracted me most to his 1981 conference was the half-day allotted to a presentation by Carl Rogers. Before, on my 1977 trip, I hadn't had the opportunity to meet Rogers. I had only been able to afford the 5 day rather than the 9 day version of the La Jolla Program and Rogers only came down from his hillside home to talk to the 9 day participants, not to their 5 day poor relations. I had, though, heard that on one of his previous downhill trips Rogers had suffered the embarrassment of being hoisted onto a chair set on a table and then had the surrounding groupies bow down before him. Possibly this was why he wasn't keen to visit the programme too often.

Be that as it may, I certainly wanted to see him. Because while I was not about to bow down before him, I at least wanted to see in person someone I greatly revered --and still do. For were it not for Carl Rogers I would never have found a vocation in counselling, nor been inspired to learn more of his ideas by attending graduate school at the University of Illinois.

Rogers was not the only presenter at Bill's conference that I was interested in meeting. Eugene Gendlin, who was later to found 'focusing-oriented therapy', was also allotted a half-day slot. Although 'Gene's' presence alone would not have drawn me to attend, it certainly was an added attraction, principally because I was aware of his closeness to Rogers in carrying through the huge Wisconsin research project into the effectiveness of client-centred therapy with so-called 'schizophrenics'. I was

conversant, too, with Gendlin's development of the notion of 'experiencing' and his theory of personality change. Quite how I regarded Gendlin then, I can't recall, but certainly today—even though I am not a practitioner of focusing-oriented therapy—I regard him as the most important person-centred theorist after Rogers.

And so it was, having left behind the hot and humid pancake prairies of central Illinois, that I arrived on the UCSD campus at La Jolla to attend Bill's conference and finally meet Carl Rogers.

La Jolla itself is an attractive suburban area situated on the California coast on the northern outskirts of San Diego. Along with soft sandy beaches, it boasts a picturesque little cove. In the cove in the summer lie rows of chubby sunbathing seals, mostly asleep but in any case generally ignoring the 'Gees' and 'Wows' of the onlooking tourists. As a fashionable 'village' La Jolla has plenty of 'eateries', boutiques and parked Mercedes and Porsches. North again from the La Jolla village lies the UCSD campus set up on top of the cliffs above the Pacific, and a major attraction in attending any event on the campus is being able to spend time on the beaches below.

One of the beaches closest to the campus is Black's Beach. It's quite a famous beach in the US due to its claim to being the only municipal (i.e. city owned and approved) nude beach in the country. Part of the piquancy of my 1977 visit had been venturing to go unclothed on this beach and attempting to behave in a blasé way when confronted with the nude forms of other encounter group members. Perhaps befitting the more seriously academic character of Bill's conference I was to have no nude beach encounters in 1981, not through any re-found prudery on my part, but because since my 1977 experience a mini-el Nino had washed most of Black's Beach away.

With regard to the conference proper, the format, as I recall, was to spend the morning in encounter type groups and the afternoon attending a presentation given by an outside speaker. Rogers came to give such a presentation after one or two days. I am clear on this because before he came Bill had spent some time enlightening us on his own current ideas.

Bill was especially concerned over Carl's generalizing of the principles of client-centred therapy to interpersonal relations as a whole; that is to say, over Rogers' extension of client-centred ideas to nontherapy relationships and the consequent coining of the term 'person-centred approach'.

As someone with a keen interest in teaching and education, and also a staunch Roman Catholic, Bill had played a central role in the 1966/7 Immaculate Heart Project, a project in which Rogers' ideas on education had been tried out in a Roman Catholic school system partly staffed by nuns. Like the Wisconsin project, the results of the Immaculate Heart Project were equivocal. For Rogers the fact that half the staff left was due to their intransigence and conservatism; for Bill a matter of the project's over-emphasis on encounter group and personal growth experiences in contrast to the passing on of traditional values. The Immaculate Heart Project represented an experiment to determine how the person-centred approach could best be implemented in practical terms in the area of education and Bill's judgement was that what had transpired had been the vaunting of selfish individuality over communality.

Bill was greatly influenced in coming to such a judgement by the ideas of Michael Polanyi. Essentially a philosopher of science, Polanyi stresses the importance of tradition in the development of human knowledge. At the conference there was a big pile of Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge* on sale, and leading up to Rogers' visit Bill not only mentioned Polanyi's ideas a great deal but disseminated a paper of his in which he referenced Polanyi and criticized Rogers' ideas.

Before Rogers' visit, though, Gene Gendlin put in an appearance. Gendlin spoke for a while on his ideas--he must have just published or been about to publish his popular book *Focusing*--and then gave a demonstration of his 'focusing' approach to therapy. I remember little of the demonstration aside from the man who was Gendlin's client breaking down and sobbing for most of the final period of the short therapy session.

However, what I do remember is an interaction I had with a client-centred psychologist after Gendlin's demonstration. She asked me what I had thought of it. I replied Gendlin's approach had seemed to work okay. She replied she didn't 'buy it'. She made the point that the man who had volunteered to be Gendlin's client had attended the 9 day La Jolla program immediately prior to Bill's conference and that he had been in a highly volatile emotional state from the beginning of the conference. In her view, virtually anything would have triggered the kind of outpouring of emotion that we had seen. Whether this was the case or not, I couldn't say; who could?--which perhaps points up the difficulty of judging the effectiveness of an approach to therapy from demonstrations. I was, though, glad to have seen and heard Gendlin. He seemed amiable enough and came across as articulate, intelligent and quietly passionate.

At last, though, the day of Rogers' visit arrived. In some ways it was a bit of an anti-climax because it all began in an unexpectedly formal, academic fashion with Rogers sitting out front and reading a paper to the facing rows of conference participants. As it transpired, what Rogers had to say was highly pertinent with reference to the views Bill had been expressing earlier in the week. Indeed, Rogers had apparently read Bill's paper and his talk consisted of specific rebuttals of Bill's criticisms, allied to which Rogers spoke of his own experience of being the client of two different client-centred therapists. Both were effective client-centred therapists, said Rogers, but one was definitely more 'active' than the other and it was this more active one that best suited him personally. Quite what he meant by 'active', I couldn't exactly say. It would be helpful to unearth this paper because the sense I was left with was that as a client Rogers himself preferred a therapist who was more challenging, more verbally expressive of their own experiencing.

When Rogers had finished his talk he paused and invited comments and questions from the audience. I looked at Bill expecting him to respond to Rogers' criticisms of his criticisms. However, what I at first took to be a pregnant pause turned into a deathly silence as there was no verbal response at all from Bill. Everybody seemed to be waiting for him to speak, but Bill said nothing. Others eventually responded but Bill stayed 'shtum' and after a while we all got up and had a break.

There have been times since that experience when I have occasionally pondered Bill's reasons for not responding. Particularly so in light of the fact that in

the years to follow Bill embarked on something of a one-man campaign to counter Rogers' programme of applying the underlying principles of client-centred therapy to education and societal life in general. Indeed Bill, as Brian Thorne relates, 'hit the headlines not long after Rogers' death by launching a full-scale attack on what he considered the grave error Rogers made of generalizing from insights formulated in the counselling room to conclusions about how life should be lived in families, schools, and society at large' (2003: 111). 'Coulson went on', elaborates Brian,

to appear on American radio and television and testified before legislative committees on education, drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. He expressed the opinion that both he and Rogers owed the nation's parents an apology for having so grievously misled them into thinking that their children should be offered the core conditions and encouraged to make up their own minds about the direction of their lives.

Pearl Evans has written a book entitled *Hidden Danger in the Classroom* (1990) in which she outlines Bill's general anti-Rogers position and his opposition to 'inappropriate application of therapy to settings outside the clinic' (1990: 10). How well her presentation marries with Brian's exposition is a moot point. However, there is no doubt in my mind of the significance and continuing relevance of the debate concerning the application of Rogers' ideas to human life as a whole and their serving as ground for a person-centred 'way of being'. And certainly Brian could well be right that Bill, as a 'committed Roman Catholic', may have been alarmed at the prospect of Rogers' views becoming 'something of a modern-day religious system' (2003: 111).

Even so, it is still not clear to me why Bill remained silent; why when given the opportunity to counter Rogers' ideas in person and prevent Rogers' counterviews holding sway with us participants, he kept his peace. Perhaps it had something to do with the quasi-father-son, certainly mentor-pupil relationship, Bill had with Rogers, a relationship such that 'when Rogers moved to California, Coulson packed up his family and followed' (Evans, 1990: 9): that Bill didn't want to appear the ungrateful 'son'; perhaps it had something to do with the nature of the ideas and beliefs: that when fundamental commitments and convictions are involved it is difficult to engage in dialogue--witness religious groups and certain person-centred groupings; or perhaps the whole issue was so huge for Bill that he felt if he started to speak he wouldn't be able to control what he said.

In any case, Bill didn't speak and I personally felt let down, not only in terms of not hearing the arguments and counter-arguments being bandied back and forth and thereby gaining a clearer understanding of the issues involved, but because I was denied a demonstration of an academic client-/person-centred debate featuring Rogers' prowess as a debater.

However, while I was denied a demonstration of one aspect of Rogers' person-centred way of being, this was not to be the case with regards to another, that of his prowess as a therapist. At the end of Rogers' talk, just before the break, it had been announced that he was willing to give a demonstration therapy interview if anybody was prepared to be his client. Anxious to take advantage of this once-in-a-life-time opportunity, in my own mind I quickly accentuated the reality of my

personal 'psychopathology' and along with several others presented myself as a potential client. As things turned out, it was not me but someone whom I shall call Sharon who became Rogers' client. From an earlier conversation, I knew Sharon had recently been having a very difficult time and so, seeing her need as greater than my own, I deferred to her.

My memory of Rogers' demonstration session with Sharon is somewhat hazy. It was held in a fairly large hall in which Rogers and Sharon sat on upright chairs facing each other, while the rest of us, up to a hundred or so, sat on the floor surrounding them. To add to the artificial and impersonal nature of the setting, prominent between Rogers and Sharon were two chin high microphones set on metal stands.

After taking a few moments to silently compose himself, Rogers invited Sharon to share whatever issues she wished. In response, 'Sharon spoke of recent events in her life that had made things extremely stressful for her. As she explored and spoke freely of her emotional pain and difficulties, Rogers, for his part, maintained a keen focus of attention upon her, nodding, 'mm--mm-ing' and verbally 'testing understandings' in his trademark way. Although Sharon's voice occasionally wobbled with emotion, there was a solidness and evenness to Rogers' emotional presence even as his appeared to give his all in attempting to sense what Sharon was experiencing. He seemed completely oblivious to the artificiality of the setting and the surrounding audience, so immersed was he in focusing upon his client. Perhaps it was the power of his attending to his client that created a sense for me of the two of them being in some kind of transparent bubble, set apart from the rest of us in a small world of their own. Whatever it was, this was my distinct impression.

At the end of the demonstration interview and having allowed some time for a change of focus, Rogers offered his audience the opportunity to ask questions both about the session and about anything else. Personally, if I were offered such an opportunity today, I think I would ask him about the value of such demonstrations, whether, as one-off sessions that aren't likely to give a false impression of a process that is usually private and may go on for years. As it was, I did ask a question, but it was on another, inconsequential matter. I don't remember what it was, but I know it was inconsequential because it was motivated more by not wanting to admit later: 'I had the opportunity to ask Carl Rogers a question and I didn't take it'.

Following the question and answer session, a few of us lined up to get Carl's autograph. Several months before the workshop, I had acquired a copy of Carl's latest book, *A Way of Being*, and when it was my turn it was this that I presented to him. He was sitting down and I was standing up. No word was exchanged between us. He simply reached up, took the book and wrote his name on the middle of the title page. As he returned the book our eyes met. I wouldn't want to claim that the look he gave me was what Martin Buber terms the immediate glance of the I-Thou encounter, but there was something unique for me in the look in Carl's eyes. It surprised me because it was not what I would have expected. It was a look not of strength and power but of vulnerability and even helplessness, the kind of helplessness I associate with babies. It has been suggested to me that Carl's look was more a matter of him being, at 79, quite worn out by the day's events--maybe so.

Later at the conference, after Carl had left, I had the opportunity to speak to Sharon and find out from her what it had felt like being Carl's client. Despite my own sense of her and Carl sharing in a reality separate from the rest of us, she herself confessed that she had been keenly aware of the presence of the surrounding audience. She had, she said, felt so touched emotionally by the way Carl had responded to her that she had been on the verge of being overcome with emotion and crying helplessly in front of all of us, something that she in no way wanted to happen as she would have found it excruciatingly embarrassing. It was for this reason, she affirmed, that 'as much as possible I avoided looking into his eyes, because I knew if I had done so I would have totally broken down'.

Today I still have my signed copy of *A Way of Being*, and today I'm more aware why Bill would not have been happy with its title. It's not an easy thing to take the I-Thou glance outside the counselling room; not an easy thing to specify how the principles underlying client-centred therapy are best applied in the world at large.

A few years ago I spotted Bill on a British TV programme about the influence of humanistic psychology in the US. He was asked about the closure of the Immaculate Heart convent that apparently resulted from the Rogerian project. It closed, he said, because the nuns left the order. 'They became self-actualized', he jibed. By which he meant that they became selfish singletons out of touch with communal values, me-generation monads 'ruled by the authority of their imperial selves'.

Bill is now effectively estranged from the person-centred community. To me this is a pity because I think he pointed to a significant challenge in the further development of person-centred theory, a challenge that Pete Sanders and others have identified: how to make theoretical sense of the contribution of societal influences in the becoming of persons.

References

- Evans, P. (1990) *Hidden Danger in the Classroom*. Petaluma: Small Helm Press.
Thorne, B. (2003) *Carl Rogers (2nd Edn)*. London: Sage.