

The Emergence of Carl Rogers' Interest in Mysticism: An Introduction and Interaction

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Abstract

A phenomenological analysis of a narrative by psychologist Carl Rogers reveals a mystical experience that occurred while he was engaged in personal and group counselling. For Rogers it was a moment of profound connection with his transcendental core. The experience facilitated the release of healing, energy and growth.

This verbatim is based on an imaginary conversation with the late Dr. Carl Rogers who pioneered work in the field of psychology. It is based on the introductory remarks on Rogers' interest in mysticism. In this conversation with the spiritual director, Rogers expresses his amazement and joy of the fact that his presence in the group therapy session is conducive to healing and growth when he is in touch with his "transcendental core." The verbatim is followed by a supervision session and an evaluation.

Keywords: *Healing; Transcendent; Client-Centered; Person-Centered; Intuitive; Mysticism; ESP; Drug-Related*

Introduction

In spiritual direction, as in psychology, it is important and necessary to write verbatim reports after sessions with directed or clients. It seems possible that the process of verbatim writing can be used in other settings in order to "interrogate" the text of an interview or a conversation. Using active imagination to interrogate a text or letter and to respond allows the text to speak, i.e. the person behind the words begins to speak and their affect becomes apparent as the verbatim is constructed. In the end, the text offers more to the writer of the verbatim than it would otherwise.

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The purpose of this article is to explore the emergence of Carl Rogers' interest in mysticism, to determine whether there is a development of Rogers' interest in and understanding of mysticism, and, through the use of active imagination, interview Rogers about his experience during a spiritual direction session [1].

Among the many significant features of Carl Rogers' life and writings are his beliefs about humanity, the nature of life, and its mystical [2], spiritual dimension. American psychologist Carl Rogers 1902-1987 pioneered non-directive "Client-centered /Person-centered Therapy. Rogers' approach is considered humanistic, his therapeutic style method is non-directive, allowing him to listen and reflect back to the client ([3]: 488). For Rogers, the bedrock of successful interactions in therapy is the therapist's unconditional positive regard for the client, thus creating an atmosphere of calm and acceptance in the session. Rogers believed that clients can be encouraged to use their own resources for self-understanding and growth ([3]: 35).

In "The Characteristics of a Helping Relationship" [4]. Rogers expresses his understanding of human nature-that human beings are in a process of becoming, of realizing their potentialities-and that his work as a therapist is to confirm that reality. This dynamic view of human nature "rejected both the notions of perfection and evil." Rogers believed that people were inherently "positive, forward-moving, constructive, realistic, trustworthy" ([3] 35).

Within the context of this dynamic view of human nature, in 1961 Rogers wrote about his new learning, namely: that “experience is, for me, the highest authority” ([4], 1989: 25). Nothing can take precedence over direct experience, says Rogers, though he is careful to nuance his view: “My experience is not authoritative because it is infallible.” Rogers’ final remarks summarize his views: “Life, at its best, is a flowing, changing process in which nothing is fixed” and “I can only try to live by my interpretation of the current meaning of my experience” and try to give to others the permission and freedom to develop their own interpretation, meaning and inner freedom ([4]: 28-29).

Only later in his writings does Rogers address the “mystical” element in human experience, perhaps because it takes courage [5]. In “Some New Challenges to the Helping Professions” published in 1973 ([4]: 371), Rogers recalls James’ view that normal waking consciousness may not be the only type of consciousness, as he begins to address the reality of drug-induced states, ESP, and expanded consciousness experiences ([4]: 371). Then quite simply he says, “I have never had a mystical experience, nor any experience of a para-normal reality, nor any drug-induced state that gave me a glimpse of a world different from our secure ‘real’ world.” By 1978, Rogers opines that the basic fact of all human life is that “we live in separate realities” ([4]: 424), and that even in considering John Lily’s research and mystical experience of the “universe as a unity based on love,” “there are as many ‘real worlds’ as there are people. Nonetheless, this reality can be a resource for learning in all the history of the world and of “living together without fear”.

In 1986, the year before he died, Rogers described his most fluid, intuitive moments within therapy sessions. He speaks of his inner, intuitive self, when he is in touch with the unknown in him, when he is in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, and that with an agency not his own, he experiences his own presence as “releasing and helpful” for the client ([4]: 137). Rogers goes on to say, “his inner spirit touched the inner spirit of the other” and that the relationship transcended itself and became a part of something larger and transcendent ([4]: 138) [6].

Carl Rogers’s mystical awareness seems to have come at the end of his life in a period when he recalled moments of relationship, connection, congruence, and freedom within therapy sessions. He experienced himself a “receiver” of transcendent moments, of unity with another person, and, as an instrument-not a cause-of healing. Understanding himself as a “center of consciousness,” Rogers wrote: Our experiences, it is clear, involve the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I, like many others, have underestimated the importance of this mystical, spiritual dimension ([4]: 138). Carl Rogers’ journey toward a new understanding of reality ended in the paradoxical experiences of unity, amid separateness; of flowing in life’s processes, not directing them; of healing others by remaining in his own “transcendent core.” Yes, as Rogers stated, the evidence [of other types of consciousness] grows more and more impressive” ([4]: 371) and Rogers’ intuition into mysticism puts him among the “great mystics-dreamers, visionaries, messengers from an uncharted horizon-...pioneers of the evolution of the human spirit” ([7]: 146).

Part II – An Interaction

Spiritual direction is a practice aimed to assist persons to discuss their experience of God in order to facilitate the growth of their relationship with God. In the Western tradition of Christianity there have been numerous models of spiritual direction. However, the model developed by Ignatius of Loyola is most consonant with the goal of enabling people to converse about their experience of God. Spiritual direction is a process rooted in spirituality with theology as its foundation. Its practice is predicated upon the belief that God seeks relationships with people, God acts in people’s lives, God can be found in all things, and that human beings have an intrinsic openness to transcendence.

The spiritual director engages as if Dr. Rogers were participating in a spiritual direction session. The spiritual director engages in an imaginary “role play” with Rogers attempting to unpack elements in the experience that seem significant to him. Through this imaginative process, which includes the interview and the supervisory session following on, one may gain possible insight into Rogers’ consciousness during the session and insight into the processes of accompanying someone in spiritual direction.

It is significant to note that the chapter in *The Carl Rogers Reader* on which this “verbatim” was based was written in 1986. Rogers was to die suddenly the following year, 1987. It seems as though his remarks in this selection come at the end of a long career spent helping people to “self-actualize” through experiencing a therapy environment where they felt secure and accepted. He seems to feel affirmed and happy in his career [8-16].

A Hypothetical Spiritual Direction Interview with Carl Rogers

(SD = Spiritual Director; CR = Carl Rogers)

SD: So, Carl, I understand you want to talk about some significant moments in your work as a therapist.

CR: Yes, thank you. I did want to speak to someone about it. After I wrote that section of the book and reflected on it, I was struck that some pretty special things that happened, without my even trying!

SD: Without your trying?

CR: Yes, you see when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me.

SD: What's that like for you, Carl?

CR: I suppose it's a little frightening. I'm not sure what's there, but there are times when I'm in a slightly altered state of consciousness during a session. There are times when I feel that whatever I do is full of healing.

SD: Whatever you do is full of healing.

CR: Simply my presence is releasing and helpful. There is nothing I can do to force this experience, but when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, something special happens. (He gets reflective and silent).

SD: Close to your transcendental core.

CR: Well, close to the deepest part of me. And there I feel such inner unity.

SD: Such unity?

CR: When I can relax and can be close to that transcendental core of me, then I may have the freedom to behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways which I cannot justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my thought processes. But these strange behaviors turn out to be right, in some odd way.

SD: Right in some way, somehow appropriate? (laughs).

CR: Yes, that's it. I feel free! You know at these moments in the group 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. Profound growth and healing and energy are present.

SD: Moments of connection, Carl?

CR: Connection, yes, beyond us, but somehow part of something larger, as I said.

SD: And that connection to something larger brought growth and healing and energy?

CR: (Carl is quiet. He seems moved by the experience.) You know, that kind of transcendent phenomenon has happened before when I've worked with groups. It's changed some people's lives.

SD: It's changed some people's lives.

CR: (Carl sits quietly. Seems moved. Director waits a short while and says)

SD: Carl, what's moving in you right now? Can you put a name on it?

CR: I think I realize that this account partakes of the mystical. Our experiences, it is clear, involve the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I, like many others, have underestimated the importance of this mystical, spiritual dimension.

SD: Let's take a few moments so can sit with what you've just said.

CR: I'd like that.

SD: (A few minutes have passed.) Carl, what's going on in your now, what's emerged for you?

CR: I can only say that I feel immense gratitude.

SD: Immense gratitude

CR: (Carl is quiet. Smiles)

SD: Thank you, Carl.

Session Ends.

Supervisory Session some days later:

Supervisor: Why did you follow "connection" and not energy or healing? You could have asked Carl about the energy?

SD: I think it's because he said the connection brought the growth, healing and energy.

Supervisor: What were you feeling when Carl was silent?

SD: I was actually trying to take in his words. It seems that Carl didn't put his response in feeling terms, but he did indicate that he knows that these experiences are not ordinary. They "partake (s) of the mystical." Now, in retrospect, he realizes that he underestimated the power of the "mystical, spiritual dimension" within himself and in his interactions, because some people's lives were changed. He seemed quite moved.

Supervisor: What was going on inside you?

SD. I was so touched myself and feeling humbled by the whole thing...to be in the presence of someone who cared so much about people coming to some health and wholeness. I also think it was quite significant for Dr. Rogers to realize that he was a kind of channel for healing.

Supervisor: What would you do if you were to meet him for another session?

SD. I'll have to think about that and get some advice from my therapist.

End of Interview.

Evaluation

Q. What is the value of such an imaginative activity? Doesn't it seem artificial, contrived?

A. At the creating the supervision session, I found myself very moved by this man's evident concern for people's well-being. As I imagined the end of the interview, I spent a few moments quietly, as with Carl Rogers, and I felt grateful to have this opportunity to be with him, if only in an imaginative verbatim at that hour in his life.

Materials and Methods

Materials

In order to enter into this process, it is necessary to have a verbatim from a previous client or direct meeting or some form of narrative text, perhaps historical, biographical, transcripts of interviews, or from mystical writings ensuring that the narrative is in the first person. It should be no more than twenty typed lines, if possible. If the text is too long, the process will become tedious.

Method

The method is broadly phenomenological, that is, the interviewer should ask questions of the text. Describe what happened. Question the text to find out what the subject experienced within him/herself, what he/she experienced in relation to others.

Conclusion

This study shows that when the writer of the verbatim engages the text in an imaginative manner, or the writer's recollections of a speaker, something new and alive can be created. The process may engender feelings of empathy, understanding, anger, love, grief or respect. The process may enhance future meetings with a directee or client.

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Conflict of Interest

No funds were received for this article.

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