

CARL ROGERS SPEAKS  
on CHARACTERISTICS of  
EFFECTIVE COUNSELING  
1985

*This is a transcription of informal remarks made by Rogers to initiate discussion among a group of counselors and counselor trainees at a workshop directed by Natalie Rogers.(ed)*

I think that one of the things that really differentiates the Person-Centered or Client-Centered Approach from other kinds of therapy is that there's much more trust in the basic trustworthiness of the human organism.

I've come to realize more and more that there's a sharp difference. In orthodox psychoanalysis the core personality needs to be tamed -- it's wild, destructive, needs to be socialized. In a lot of religions, persons are conceived in sin and they're born evil. And only by the grace of God can they be saved and so forth. I understand that many, many people believe that people are essentially evil.

It's just that in my experience that is not the case. I find continually in working with people, people who've done destructive things, who've hurt others, who've been hurtful people, but as you get to know them, as bit by bit you peel aside the layers of the onion you find that at the core the person is truly constructive, not negative and evil in nature.

That's one characteristic that distinguishes the Client-Centered and Person-Centered Approach, the philosophy that underlies the whole thing. I should say, too, I don't think that the philosophy that one adopts is something above the experiences. As you get to know people more and more deeply, if you should find the opposite of what I'm saying, then you would believe the opposite. And if you find that people inwardly are trustworthy then you might believe that human nature at its very most basic is positive or constructive.

People say it's [that people are] "Good." I don't know it's good, that's a kind of moral judgement. Just as you see a deer or bear or lion or whatever, they're positive. They may kill animals for food and various things seeming harsh, but it's not anything evil in their nature. It's a constructive aspect of their survival.

I don't know what to call them; but the attitudes or mind-set or characteristics of the effective counselor are very important. I never know what order to present them in but perhaps the simplest to talk about, and the most difficult to achieve, is empathy.

Empathy can be just a word, just mean listening, or it can be an exceedingly intense attempt to capture or understand the inner world of the person you're dealing with -- with all the nuances of feeling and meaning and so on which are real for him or her -- not for you but for him or her. That's particularly evident when you're dealing with someone of a different culture, where their attitudes toward the family for example, are different from your own, or their attitudes towards the opposite sex are quite different from your own. Can you catch the attitude or feeling that person has and understand it as it is in him or her? It's a very demanding task. And the notion of just listening is far from catching what it contains. And then in responding empathically...I don't quite remember how the phrase, "reflection of feeling" got started but I don't like it; it's too shallow, much too shallow.

When one is endeavoring to capture the whole inner world of this person, that takes all you have. It means laying aside something of yourself, of your own personal values and attitudes in order to

really catch the attitudes of the other person. And the only way to do that is if you have enough assurance that you can return to your own self and your own values if you wish to. You don't get lost in the world of the other. That [getting lost] can happen, it's most uncomfortable. It's not helpful to the other person and it's certainly not helpful to you. The best of all, is to really enter this other person's world, knowing that you can return to your own world.

And in responding to that [other person's world], each response, in my estimation, is simply checking. It's saying this, "I'm trying to be a companion to you in your search and your exploration. I want to know, am I with you? Is this the way it seems to you? Is this the thing you're trying to express? Is this the meaning it has for you?" So in a sense I'm saying, "I'm walking with you step by step, and I want to make sure I am with you. Am I with you?"

So that's a little bit of my understanding about empathy.

Another characteristic that has been described, it's called by various names, and one of those has caused a lot of difficulty – unconditional positive regard – meaning I care for you without conditions. I don't say, "I like you if...I care about you if you behave in such and such a way." One reason it's caused people a lot of trouble is that they feel, "I can't always feel that way. Sometimes I am feeling conditional...I like you when you hear me, or..."

That brings up something in regard to any of these, in regard to empathy or...that is of any of these conditions that we're talking about. That is, they were formulated to express what is happening when movement or progress is taking place in therapy. So, it isn't that you can always be completely empathic. Your client is very fortunate when you are sensitively and deeply empathic. Can't always be unconditionally positive in your caring for the client, but your client is very fortunate and tends to move forward when you do feel, "I care for you as you are...warts and all." That's a very positive experience and tends toward growth.

The other condition, which perhaps is most basic of all, is realness or congruence or genuineness whatever name you want to call it. If you're putting on a show of being empathic, that's no good. If you're really, intensely trying to understand, that's a congruent type of empathy. You are being what you are. Perhaps the definition has the most meaning when during an interview, sort of in spite of yourself, you're feeling bored, you're feeling annoyed with the client, you're all concerned about something back home, and then, if you put up a pretense of being empathic and caring and so on, that's not helpful.

So that it is best even when it seems embarrassing or difficult, I think it's best to be the feelings you are at the moment and that would be congruent. Almost any persistent feeling that seems non-therapeutic deserves to be expressed. It may not be empathic, it may not be caring, that's too bad. But it's better to be the feeling that you are.

One story I've told before, maybe some of you have heard it, but to me it makes this point very clearly. A counselor at the University of Chicago got word that his son had been injured. He wasn't quite sure how badly and his immediate impulse of course was to dash home and see what the situation was. But he realized that, "My next client comes from a long, long ways away. She's made a great effort to be here and it just isn't fair to cancel out. I'll see her and then I'll go home."

So he kept the appointment and he did the best he could to be listening and so on, he went through all the motions of being a good counselor. But he finally realized, "I'm just not here at all, I'm home with my boy." So he finally stopped the interview and said, "I'm very sorry, I'm not hearing you well because I've just got word that my son has been injured."

She said, “Oh, it’s you. I thought it was me.” In other words, the client knew something was wrong in the relationship so like most of us she immediately blamed herself. And it’s such a relief to find out, “Oh, no, it was something that had to do with the therapist.”

I think that illustrates very well the effect that it wasn’t until he was real, until he said, “I’m not here, I’m back home with my boy,” that the relationship again was sound.