

On Becoming More Whole? Necking in Glasgow: Prisoners Of Worth

Some personal learning from prior to and at the August 1999 Forum, kindly hosted by PCTScotland and including BAPCA.

A Forum Context

At our joint PCT Scotland/BAPCA 1999 Forum in Glasgow there was an ongoing community of anywhere between around fifty and in excess of two hundred people. There were workshops on offer, there were speeches. There was socialising, isolation, eating and drinking and sleeping (a little!) and... There was angst, anger, joy, boredom... There were feelings of belonging, feelings of alienation... There was sharing, there was silence (shared or disconnected), there was...

A Personal Context

My own context was as, in part, *going* as Steve, BAPCA Chair (Doing Steve is his close friend); in part as Trainer Steve; in part as Therapist Steve; in part as Supervisor Steve; in part as White Male (et cetera) Steve...; in part as Thinking Steve (Theoretical Steve is an ally); in part as Feeling Steve; in part as Public Steve (closely related with BAPCA Chair Steve yet not so friendly with Doing Steve) and in part as Private Steve (enlisted in some PCA Army?)... Yet the more I *go* there, the more my *being* there seems less and less easy to differentiate into parts - at least at times (and wherever there may be).

Theoretical Steve has puzzled for some time as to the extent to which one-to-one client-centred therapy theory can be applied to groups - perhaps especially 'community' (although the distinction between community and other groups is coming to have less and less meaning and significance for Whole Steve, as I hope will become more clear). Conversely, the more I experience being in community, the more I experience myself as community (as I also hope will become more clear).

A Carl Rogers Context

Carl wrote (in the section 'Can We Permit Ourselves To Be Whole Men And Women?' in 'A Way Of Being', Houghton Mifflin, 1980, especially pages 249 to 253) of how our education valued only 'above the neck' learning - yet in life and client/person-centred training we learn to value feelings, too.

But, due largely to our education, we still tend to dichotomise these two aspects.

I so closely relate to Carl's writings: Where training courses are overtly structured, how often I have seen feelings frowned upon in a group structured for theory work, or it being made clear to the trainee undertaking theoretical musings in a group brought together for personal growth that this is not the appropriate place or time to be communicating intellect. Worse, the trainee who is 'neck down' in a 'neck up' group or 'neck up' in a 'neck down' group has even been accused of 'sabotaging' that group, or 'polluting' it or 'hijacking it' or...

Further, I now feel sure that while thoughts and emotions are two very significant distinctions, there are others too (an obvious one for me being *doing* and groups brought together for task oriented purposes - wherein thinking may be more acceptable than feeling, for instance, yet both can become unacceptable when it comes down to 'getting on with it' - whatever 'it' may be...).

Back to Carl:

It seems that we live on an either-or basis. We are aware of, and express, what we think; or we are aware of, and express, our emotional reactions. Almost never are the two sides of our life brought together.

Referring to Thomas Hanna ('Bodies In Revolt', 1970), Rogers strongly voiced the view that we are prevented from living as whole beings through giving greater credence to the conscious and rational - and underestimating our 'composite' selves.

I quote a relatively lengthy passage because it has great resonance within me:

Yet I can testify from personal experience that it is not easy for people whose lives have been dichotomised for decades to achieve this unity. I have conducted courses in which the whole group, including myself, have agreed that our feelings are as important a part of the curriculum as our ideas. Yet, if a member starts exploring some highly emotionalised experiences into which he is beginning to gain understanding, other members hesitate to bring up anything but feeling reactions... And if one person starts a class meeting excitedly propounding the ideas involved in a budding theory he is just beginning to develop, that session tends to be intellectual in focus. Only occasionally has a group been able to *be* whole persons in the experience. Yet, when they have achieved this, the results have been unforgettable. For one who is interested in expressions of learning by the total and unified person, this is heart-warming...

Yet if we are truly aware, we can hear the *silent* screams of denied feelings echoing off every classroom wall and university corridor. And if we are sensitive enough, we can hear the creative thoughts and ideas that often emerge during and from the open expression of our feelings...

Most of us consist of two separated parts, trying desperately to bring themselves together into an integrated soma, where the distinctions between mind and body, feelings and intellect, would be obliterated.

God knows we need once more to be unified organisms, responsive to *all* of ourselves and *all* of our environment.

My Experience, My Process...

I have more and more come to experience myself as not dichotomised between two (thinking and feeling) 'parts' but as an internal community of many 'selves'. My guess is that as an infant I was as whole as I could be at that time ('organismic valuing'), but that as I grew and developed various aspects of my experiencing became differentiated and compartmentalised. I recall that my process later was probably symbolised by me as two main, thinking and feeling parts, yet now I do not experience myself as a dichotomy (which for me represents polar extremes and linear processes) - rather more an interplay within this community that is me, wherein the 'boundaries' between all of my selves are less rigid and my selves are more prepared to openly and freely meet with each other. Further, I feel good about my Composite Self, it is a nice community within which to exist: I mostly feel comfortable and accepted and at peace, even though my community is in constant transition.

Thus my personal process would seem to have been one of wholeness ('organismic valuing'), then separation/compartmentalisation, followed by a coming together again. I experience my experience as fitting very closely with client-centred personality theory (around the formation of the self, for instance): Indeed, it is precisely this very close match between my own experience and client-centred theory which meant that when I 'discovered' client-centred theory, it spoke to me in a voice that I felt understood and

cared for me.

As I wrote the above paragraphs Critical Steve wagged his metaphorical finger at me saying 'this is all too ideal'. My community members come together and resoundingly yet gently assert 'No, it is not. It is a process. We have come a long way - perhaps at first together, then on separate journeys - yet now we are travelling companions again. We may still have a very long journey ahead of us (to this ideal place). You, Critical Steve, have come along with us. Even when our journeys seemed separate we were heading in a similar direction. Perhaps eventually we will all arrive together, then maybe we'll set off together again, or even go our separate ways - who knows? Yet for now, let's just rejoice in our travelling companionship.' And you know, Critical Steve feels okay with this - he even realises now that he took a similar direction through choice.

Forum Form and Structure

In 'My Experience, My Process...' I was saying something about my self structure (or self concept). I was saying something about me as I experience and symbolise myself.

In my view, one of the many aspects of our Forum was an exploration of some of our many structures, with some (or even many) expressing their need or wish for structure(s). In expressing my own view of this, Accepting Steve does not wish to impose his view on anyone, Missionary Steve wants to influence you - and Positive Regard Needs Steve wants you all to come over to him and tell him he's right. These Steves have negotiated and agreed on a co-operative venture! There's other Steve's too - but they feel okay about not having a voice just now - they know their voices are welcome whenever...

I link here with Proposition Eleven (the Nineteen Propositions first appeared in 'Client-Centred Therapy', (Constable, 1951) - and a part of it I often experience as neglected. In Proposition Eleven, Carl wrote of how experiences may be accurately symbolised in the self concept (11.a., i.e. congruence) or may be denied or distorted (11.c., i.e. incongruence). He also wrote (11.b.) of *ignoring as there was no relevance*. It seems to me as though if I were completely whole - if I were actually accessing all of my selves at any given moment I would probably be/feel insane! For me, it feels as though there's a world of difference between *having access* to all of my selves and *actually accessing* them all at the same time. To illustrate: I see one of my selves as Football Steve, another as Music Steve, another as Sexual Steve, another as Satirical Steve, another as Cynical Steve, another as Comedian Steve - and so on (and on and on). In a client-centred theory group, for instance, Football Steve may be ignored as he is seen by other Steves - and sees himself - as having no relevance in the moment. This for me is not the same as denial - I have access to Football Steve - and/or Football Steve will emerge - should he become relevant (so, for example, I might access him/he might come forward for/with an analogy or metaphor around the experiencing of threat and the process of defence, or, given that in my minds eye I remain a lithe winger when my reality as a forty something is of being somewhat unfit and overweight, of inaccurate symbolisation!).

As for our Forum, it seems to me (and I'm a little nervous about writing this) that, for some, there were assumptions being made about what would be gained/experienced in each structure. Like gaining theory from a talk, experiencing feelings in encounter, and so on. What was attended would depend upon needs and wishes as experienced at the time - perhaps whichever self was to the fore. Yet for me this *felt* wrong and I *thought* it was wrong (which in turn influenced my *doing/not doing* at times). For me this was an illustration of the thinking/feeling dichotomy as expressed by Rogers and Hanna. For me this kind of symbolising is becoming less and less relevant, has less and less meaning. For me, structures more and more seem to serve to thwart my actualising tendency - which I believe underlies and 'drives' all of my Steve's both as individuals and as a community...

Conditions Of Worth

... I believe that many structures are akin to - and I experience many structures as - conditions of worth. These conditions of worth often serve to (or have a tendency to) thwart my actualising tendency. Theoretical Steve got to wondering if our Community Group had (indeed all groups have) an actualising tendency - an inner striving to maintain and enhance themselves, and/or a growth impulse akin to the formative tendency. If so, what community conditions of worth might serve to thwart these growing tendencies?

I experienced and perceived a few community conditions of worth at different times (they were 'real' for me, wherever they came from). I felt at times that I would only be valued (or would be valued more) if I came from an *emotional* place - my 'neck up' would for sure be valued less. I felt at times that if I were to *do* (move chairs or organise, for instance) I would be valued less by some - perhaps more by others. I sensed that to laugh would at times be unacceptable, or to hog the floor, or to...

One stark and powerful illustration of this for me was my ways of being - and how I experienced the ways of being of others - in different contexts. A small group over coffee or alcohol or over lunch or in a corridor or - or anywhere, really - would be chatting or joking or sad or argumentative or tearful or intense or light or - just too many variations to even list. Yet as we walk through the door into community... Even there and then, there can be a 'hubbub', a mulch of ways of being... And then, after a few minutes, that silence descends...

... And then POW! POW as in Zap! And POW as in prisoners of war...

... Or prisoners of worth.

I have experienced one of the cruellest conditions of worth as being '**that is not very person-centred**' - yet I can think of nothing more counter-productive to a growth promoting climate than conditions of worth about what is and what is not person/client-centred! Another 'yet': Yet I witness this often both from others and from within. How often has Critical Steve (often in cahoots with Theoretical Steve) chastised Trainer Steve and/or Practitioner Steve for not being client-centred? Humble Open Steve confesses: Quite a few times, quite a few... Worse, I cringe when I have experienced being critical in this way of others (whether voiced or silently)...

When I reflect upon 'how I first started becoming person-centred' I again shudder: I just soaked up the theory. Effectively, I avidly absorbed and internalised the theory, philosophies, attitudes, beliefs - they were introjected values from an external locus of evaluation. Yes, much of the personality theory spoke to me in an understanding and caring voice - yet (yet another yet) when it came to how to be a client-centred therapist and what to do and not do and how to be and not be...

In my past I had not, when I felt it mattered, experienced empathic understanding - rather, I had symbolised my experiencing as 'no-one understands me'. I had experienced conditional, not unconditional, positive regard. So I really fell for client-centred therapy - hook, line and sinker, as they say! It was only much, much later that I was able to revise my practice as a therapist and trainer in light of direct experiencing of both offering and receiving (as a client) the therapist core conditions. Much of my introjecting of 'how to be client-centred' for many years was, I now realise, a kind of client-centred orthodoxy - stifling both to me and to those I was 'attempting to train'...

Congruence: An Illustration?

... Yet within my Composite self even all of this feels more okay now. If, for instance, I enter the debate around whether or not therapist congruence means giving spontaneous voice to inner feelings: Carl wrote of congruence not meaning 'impulsively blurting out every passing feeling' and also of being 'transparently real'. These became conditions of worth for me, introjected values. I gave myself a hard time and for some time was confused at the tension between being transparently real while not impulsively blurting! Now I believe that there is a greater 'osmosis' between the various aspects of myself.

Now I believe that whether or not I give voice is almost irrelevant to congruence. Rather, congruence to me is a process way of being which enables me to make an informed choice about voicing. To *deny* my feelings which generate the impulse to spontaneously blurt something out could not be described as congruence. My 'above the neck' would be suppressing my 'below the neck'. To *deny* my thoughts which question the appropriateness of spontaneous blurting and freely sharing my feelings would be a denial of my 'above the neck' - again, incongruent. I believe that I cannot voice my congruence (I cannot directly communicate my congruence) - however, I can strive to be congruent and make congruent communications. In this instance, I would hope that there would be a flow of experiencing between my above the neck and my below the neck which process enables choice. Ideally, there would be no denial of significant aspects of my self - and for me, this is more whole, more genuine, more transparent - the whole me can be more fully present.

Something else around this osmosis between different aspects of my self: In the Carl Rogers 'Dialogues' (Constable, 1990, editors Howard Kirschenbaum and Valerie Land Henderson) I detected a different and refreshing way of communicating - rather than taking up an adversarial stance, I experienced Carl as somehow being in a mode of 'This is how I've heard it is for you (and checking this out), this is my experience'... My selves do not have to be in conflict all of the time - rather, they can listen respectfully to each other, try to understand each other and care for each other... Yes, they may end up agreeing or disagreeing, but the process of how they reach agreement or disagreement ceases to be so adversarial - and reaching disagreement can be fine, as can a stalemate!

My Contribution?

Finally, something about another condition/prison of worth. At one community meeting, I chose to internally set aside my 'stuff' (there was plenty several of my Steve's wanted to say!) in order to focus more intensely on the feelings, thoughts and behaviours (et cetera?) of others. I was not *denying* my thoughts and feelings, I *welcomed* them. However, in welcoming them, I kind of made clear to each that I would offer quality time to them later - for now, could we all agree to listen and be as fully present as was possible? Yeah, okay!

Later, someone said to me "You didn't contribute tonight". POW! By not speaking, I was perceived as not contributing. Being perceived as not contributing felt valued less than speaking. Yet how often in training groups someone will return from being a client saying how much they valued respectful listening, feeling attended to and heard - yet the same respectful listening, attending and hearing is seen by some as not contributing in a group or community setting... POW! POW! POW!

This, then, is my here and now contribution. I begin to muse on the many aspects of myself. I begin to muse on the extent to which one-to-one theory may be applicable to groups. Does a group have an actualising tendency and/or a formative tendency? What conditions of worth and introjected values might be present in a group and where did they come from - what orthodoxies? What positive regard needs exist within the group? What is a groups self-concept, comprised of what personal constructs?

Which are the rigid self structures of a group, which the fluid? If a groups conditions of worth serve to thwart its actualising tendency, what 'conditions' might serve to nurture that group?

And so on.

I leave these feelings and thoughts with you, and would welcome any feedback.

With respect
Steve Vincent