

## *Interlude*

### ***Setting Aside or Erupting?***

'Ah - Empty' is empathy all scrambled up

*Motions/Emotions*

*Merging/Emerging*

I want to share with you something of a process that awakened in, and then clarified for me recently. The context is of being a co-facilitator for person-centred Diploma in Client-Centred Therapy training groups.

*Self-ish...*

My experience has been that trainee-centred groups usually pass through identifiable phases. One phase, it seems to me, is that very often in the early days of a group, members speak from their own frames of reference – as in; one person shares something, another responds with *'this is how it is for me'*. The original speaker often expresses (frequently much later, sometimes in the whole learning community, sometimes in private reflective notes, or in a smaller group) feeling unheard and devalued at the time of their original disclosure, worthless or angry, disappointed - even insulted. *'What is the point in my speaking if I feel unheard, that my words were worthless, that I feel lost as a consequence of sharing – that I might as well not even exist (at least as far as this group is concerned)?'* Often this takes the form of *'It took me a lot to speak... Then it was as if my words fell in to a vacuum and someone else's world took over.'*

Furthermore, very often responses from the internal frame of reference of each and every trainee in response to the original disclosure of another are 'justified' in the name of 'I was being congruent' and self-aware. Often there is even indignation in this self-justification – a kind of 'Hey! I was just being

congruent! Isn't congruence one of the core conditions?' *Self-justification* – now there's an interesting concept! Which aspect of self is being justified, do you think?

I want to quickly share with you at this point something that I have found very helpful – and this is that if I can embody *communicating* rather than *responding* I experience myself as entering a far more empathic way of being than if I simply engage in a verbal tennis match – you serve, I'll hit it back... My experience is that there is a subjective world of difference between respectfully communicating empathy and understanding of the other and responding to the other from within my own frame of reference.

So – back to the group context: - Can we surmise, then, that at this early time in the life of a diploma in client-centred therapy training group, the internal frame of reference of each trainee is unlikely to embody unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding to a significant degree? And what precisely does “to a significant degree” mean? By this I mean at least not to the degree that I would expect to encounter when client to a “fully functioning” client-centred therapist. That's okay – we are, after all, at the beginning of our training programme – yes? Hmm...

Anyway: I was recently co-facilitator for a whole day training group and, for the first time in as long as I care to recall, during the whole of the morning session I was not experiencing any empathy or understanding at all. I was just so wrapped-up in my own feelings and thoughts that I felt *'flat'* - and to me the whole group felt flat, too...

(As an aside of sorts, I inwardly mused – albeit briefly - around whether my perception of my experiencing of others was distorted by my own feeling of flatness... Or whether I might be 'projecting' my feeling of flatness onto or into the group - and so on. All interesting and useful questions for me as a facilitator, but not issues I focused on for long at the time and not what I want to explore and write about right now, either. As per Proposition 11b, this will be

“ignored because there is no perceived relationship to the self-structure” - for the time being, at least!) <sup>1</sup>

Back to the group: at one point I did communicate some useful information to a trainee, but otherwise I was pretty silent. It was as if my empathic capacity had been somehow ‘squashed’ – or perhaps ‘overtaken’ by my own feelings and thoughts... ‘Pinched-out,’ ‘squeezed out,’ ‘flattened’ or ‘submerged...’

My *way of being* was, I think, somehow and to some degree *respectful* – in that I did not ‘sabotage’ the group and nor did I *pretend* or *feign* empathy or understanding. To have ‘presented a façade’ of empathy would have been incongruent for me, as well as disrespectful to trainees. Nor did I resort to *implementing skills* - for I know that I *can* choose to ‘switch over to autopilot’ and reflect and paraphrase and all that bag of tricks. Yet when I reflect on my being this ‘automatic’ way I feel somewhat empty and phony and dissatisfied – even if or when trainees don’t even notice!

*Motions or Emotions?*

Yes – I can choose to ‘play the game of being a person-centred facilitator’. I can ‘go through the *motions*’... Yet when on autopilot I am not going through the *emotions* – and this leaves me feeling shallow, hollow... The encounter lacks vibrancy, energy – there is little or no enrichment for either party.

As I said: empty. ‘Ah... *Empty...*’ is *empathy all scrambled up...*

My quietness, then, to me felt ‘real’ enough, genuine enough, authentic enough... While my silence was on the one hand ‘transparent’, on the other hand I was not into presenting some kind of simpering, attention-seeking pose! In other words, there was an authentic presence, not a synthetic presentation.

So... So I think that I was being as congruent as I could be in each moment, and respectful, too.

Though... Though no empathy or understanding was accessed within me (and therefore could not flow from me).

Later that day I really got in touch with sensing a feeling of profound loss inside of me. I did not feel at all *nourished* through this morning encounter – and despite my communication of information being received as useful, I suspect that the trainee with whom I shared my knowledge did not exactly feel enormously enriched through the quality of my presence either. Sure – my internal processing held an intrinsic interest for me and to some extent represented growth and the development of ideas and understanding – yet I did not feel that all was as it could be.

Later still that day I shared something of my self-explorations with the group. Participants identified that another phase they had moved into was to do with members communicating a greater degree of empathy and understanding towards one another, rather than a constant ‘this is me’. This *felt good*. (This *felt good* to and for all concerned – including me.) In other words, not only did I experience responses to personal material being ‘this is how it is for me’ as lacking in many respects, here was affirmation that group members, too, had found a more satisfying way of being.

*However!* However, this process whereby group members felt good about themselves and each other was generally couched in terms of ‘*setting yourself aside*’ in order to focus on the other – and this felt like it represented yet another kind of loss, to me. Almost a kind of martyrdom or *self-sacrifice!*

Thus individual process in the training group context had, it seems, moved from *self-justification* to *self-sacrifice*... I ask: which self was being justified and which self does the justifying? Which was the sacrificial self and which the self doing the sacrificing?

*Self-sacrifice?*

Those words feel very fitting, to me: *self-sacrifice*. Kind of like... I have to 'shut myself away' or 'lock parts of me away' if I am to be with you in a quality way... This feels like a *capitulation* of the self – even some kind of *defeat*.

*So*. So I thought more about empathic understanding and group process. It seems to me that it goes something like: -

A group member shares something. This feels like the offering of a gift. I communicate a degree of empathy and understanding (or at least communicate something of my authentic *striving* to experience empathic understanding) and... Wow! The group member shares something further – and this feels like a really very special gift that I have received from them. And it doesn't stop there! I communicate a degree of empathic understanding of the really very special gift I have just received, and - rock my socks off - more very special and precious gifts follow! This process is *incredibly* rewarding to both the group member and to me – a 'win-win situation', if you will.

It also seems to me that this process runs its course – reaches at least for the time being a natural end, if you will. If I so wish, when that moment in the empathic process is reached, I can then share something of how it is for me.

*I need lose nothing.*

Or maybe more accurately, all I need lose is my spontaneous blurting-out of how it is for me. So does my spontaneity need setting aside? Or maybe I can find a way for my spontaneously empathic self to emerge... Yet just look at how much enrichment I have to gain - if only I can access my empathic and understanding ways of being.

So in fact this is not a 'win-win' situation at all – rather, it is a 'win-win-win-win-win' situation! And this scenario represents a *win-win-win-win-win* situation because:- The group member who initially shares 'wins' because there is a point in speaking – s/he will feel heard and therefore valued. I 'win' because I know that I will experience enrichment through experiencing and voicing something of my empathic appreciation of another – we move towards a meaningful togetherness. I 'win' again because after our encounter has run its course, I am free to share something of my own self should I so choose – and the other wins again because she or he (or another community member) then has an opportunity to be enriched through hearing and striving to empathise with and understand me. And it seems to me that the whole learning community 'wins' too – because *everyone* has the potential or opportunity to grow through *being* connected with such *ways of being*.

Thus when a group member spoke of 'setting yourself aside' in order to be empathic and respectful it was 'like a light going on within me' and I thought '*No! No - that's not it! That doesn't quite feel right at all...*'

I then processed this further awakening – it felt really important to me. What I came up with was this: -

### *Integrated or Divided?*

It seems to me that if I 'set myself aside' then clearly I only set a *part* of my self aside – *and this would seem to be a conscious, deliberate act*. A conscious, deliberate act would seem to be driven by my self-concept and not necessarily by my organismic being – kind of: this represents what I believe I should or ought be doing or being, rather than a natural, whole way of being. And, following this 'self-sacrifice', I somehow *remain aware* of the fact that I have deliberately 'set a part of my self aside'. It's kind of like... At some level *I know that there is a part of me lurking around somewhere* – and this part of me is ready and waiting to 're-enter me', to become part of me again, when I take *another* conscious, deliberate decision to 'let that part of me back in'. In some

vague way, I do not feel *whole*. Indeed, I am not whole - I am not 'fully present' as an *integrated* whole – rather, I am present as a kind of *divided* whole.

I am incomplete.

Want to see this in action? Take a coffee break! Look at yourself and your colleagues as you re-enter the room and take your seat... What 'self' emerges? What 'self' (or selves') get set aside?

So: it seems to me that this 'setting yourself aside' perspective is actually about at least *three* selves. First there is a self that is set aside ('justified' or 'sacrificed', for instance). Second there is a self that is doing the setting aside ('justifying' or 'sacrificing'), and finally there is an empathic self. It would seem that *only the empathic self fully engages with the other person* (although this aspect of self may be closely monitored by the self that does the setting aside). It seems to me that this is very much a 'lose-lose' situation! I 'lose' a part of my self, and the other person experiences only a divided self, not a whole, integrated presence.

*Natural Born Empaths?*

I have a belief. I have a theory. I have a theory that I cannot scientifically prove - though my experience tells me loud and clear that it must be so. And that is that we are *born empathic*. Yes - we are *born with the gift of empathy*.

Moreover, it seems to me that this theory (or belief) that we are born with the capacity for empathy might extend beyond human beings and into the animal kingdom, too.

I once facilitated for a learning community in which a blind person participated – which meant that her guide dog was present in the group each week. The labrador sensed emotions - no doubt at all about it! The dog would lie quietly in

a corner – apparently unaware of group proceedings. Yet if a group member became upset, the dog would pad across the room and place her head in this person’s lap. Indeed, I would even go so far as to say that the labrador often sensed feelings more speedily than her human counterparts. Wow! Just think about that! Of course, this was not about verbal content – rather, it was as though the dog picked-up ‘emotional vibes’ and responded to them through making contact. Ask anyone who took part in that group – it was a sobering and humbling yet intensely moving experience.

I’ve had a few cats in my time – and I feel certain that they (male and female) sensed my moods, too. In particular, they would nuzzle me and curl up with me if I was upset or sorrowful. They would sense emotions like anger and frustration, too, and steer clear of me – even if I had given no outward vent to my anger or frustration. I am absolutely convinced that this cannot be put down to coincidence.

They knew.

And they responded.

You want a horrible example? Some people believe that a paedophile can instantly pick out a target child from a crowd: instant sensing of vulnerability! How do they do this?

Okay – so let us look at young children in a more positive way. I have sometimes felt quite spooked by how a young child senses my feelings when I had believed that I was ‘presenting a straight face’. I have experienced this phenomenon many, many times...

One colleague described how his four year old daughter sensed that something had been going on between mom and dad despite mom and dad being careful not to fall out in front of the children. She said to him “Daddy, instead of not talking to each other, why don’t you listen and talk to each other one at a time?”

It was as if she somehow knew – *at four years old* – some basic guidelines for the process of reciprocal empathy. I remember being at a barbecue attended by a whole lot of person-centred people... I was sat in the garden, playing a guitar and singing – to all intents and purposes the ‘life and soul of the party’. A friend’s daughter whispered to me between songs ‘Steve, why are you feeling so sad?’ How did she know? No-one else picked this up or sensed my sadness...

... Or at the very least, no-one else communicated to me their sensing of my underlying sadness.

In one of my past lives I was a sociologist (at least, that’s what it feels like)! I can still access that life... I feel sickened and saddened by some of the gender-related socialisation I witness. I am aware that I will be generalising and that generalisations can be ‘dangerous’ – please bear with me.

A young girl, Aless, aged eight. Boy can Aless be empathic! She can sense feelings in people of which the person is only dimly aware - or dare I venture even unaware? I experience Aless as proud of her empathy (she specifically asked to be named in this piece) – if a little unsettled by it at times.

A young boy aged ten. He, too, can be empathic – yet somehow seems embarrassed when he is this way. Like; somehow it is not ‘manly’ to be empathic – it’s soft and sad... For all our pretences at gender equality, it seems to me that there is still a long, long, *long* way to go.

Sad!

My first formulation was that maybe males more so than females ‘get the empathy knocked out of them’ – but this doesn’t feel quite right. It feels to me like we are all born with a natural facility for empathy, but that this gets squashed, thwarted. This feels quite right to me – because thwarted or squashed

empathy fits well with the idea of empathy emerging (or even ‘erupting’ at times).

Perhaps our natural capacity for empathy can become drowned or lost or covered up, or hidden, or protected and defended. It seems to me that for many people their empathic facility *merges* within the myriad personal constructs that form the self-concept. For others, their empathic facility becomes *submerged* by a self-concept that defends and protects itself from anything perceived as ‘soppy’ or childish or ‘soft’ or...

That’s right: sad!

Might there be a link between the thwarting of the *actualising tendency* by our conditions of worth and the thwarting of our *empathic capacities* by our conditions of worth? Indeed: *might our empathic capacity be intrinsically linked with the actualising tendency?* Carl Rogers wrote of human beings being inherently co-operative, social, trustworthy and responsible organisms.<sup>2</sup> Is it so radical to incorporate empathy and responsiveness, caring and respect into this picture?

### *Merge and Emerge*

So... So my empathic capacity may well become thwarted by my conditions of worth – through my self-actualising maintaining and enhancing my self-concept. This may link with the idea that I ‘set myself aside’ in order to be empathic with another...

However, in a different perspective it is possible that a naturally empathic me emerges (or ‘erupts’) – there need be *no setting aside, or locking away, or denial, or division* - simply a naturally empathic way of being that so much comes to the fore and embodies the whole of me and engages with the other person... In this scenario I do *not* ‘set my self aside’ or ‘lock part of me away’ or ‘leave part of me outside the room’ or ‘put the lid on’ part of me or ‘self-

sacrifice' in order to empathise and be respectful with another - *and nor do I want to*. Anyway: what part of parts of my self would I be discarding or disregarding, suppressing or ignoring – denying or distorting, sacrificing? I had an almost overwhelming experience and awareness that when I am my most empathic I am *really being myself*.

It's like... In the 'day-to-day run-of-the mill grist' of things there is a self that engages in all that mundane stuff. That's kind of okay. I survive.

I may not be enriched and nor may you be enriched.

But I do survive - and I really hope that you survive from day-to-day, too.

Yet when I am truly being as *empathic* and *respectful* as I can be, it feels like I am in touch with the deeper, inner, more profound ways of being me. My empathic and respectful self *erupts*, if you will, or somehow *gushes to the surface*, or *comes to the fore* – whatever. There is no conscious 'setting aside' or denying – rather, I am truly being the whole me that I know I can be.

I shared a draft of this paper with a diploma in client-centred therapy training group, and from the ensuing discussion the idea of an *empathy muscle* emerged. It began when someone spoke of this idea of 'setting yourself aside' in order to be empathic with a client – she was reminded of a saying to do with the therapist 'leaving their baggage at the door' when entering the counselling room... Then the idea emerged (or erupted!) of linking the use of empathy with the use of muscles – exercise a muscle and it strengthens, neglect the muscle and it withers and atrophies... So maybe it is only when an empathy muscle is weak that baggage needs to be left outside and the client encounter an incomplete therapist. Maybe if my empathy muscle is strong enough, I can carry all of my baggage without worrying about dropping it – yes?

*Developmental influences*

I now want to spend just a little time charting the development of empathy and me. Upon further reflection, it seems to me that there *is* an underlying developmental factor in all of this. I chart my own growth as a client-centred therapist and I realise that two very significant experiences occurred pretty-well simultaneously.

The first was that as an adolescent I felt and believed that no-one really understood me. Sometime later I encountered a client-centred therapist and, I think probably for the first time in my life, I experienced another person as really striving to see just how my world really felt to me, how I understood my world and all the meanings my existence had for me. This was a terrifically powerful and moving experience.

At around the same time, I started reading the works of Carl Rogers and other client-centred writers. I learned the *theory*, if you will, of empathic understanding and how it related to therapeutic process. And then I started trying to put my learning into practice. I am aware, though, that at first my 'putting into practice' was somewhat skills oriented – I had learned (or, worse still, been taught) techniques such as 'open-ended questioning' and 'paraphrasing' and 'summarising' and 'reflecting' and so on. (Incidentally, these skills were offered to me as being 'non-directive' or even 'person-centred' – when of course such skills are just that: skills. After all, a reflection is a reflection whatever the orientation of the practitioner, and a technique remains that technique come what may... Skills and techniques are generic, are they not?)

My implementation of skills was nevertheless somewhat effective – other people, it seemed, felt encouraged enough to want to continue to engage with me as a consequence of my 'non-directivity'.

It was as though the client-centred core conditions were somewhat akin to introjected values for me. I had learned all about the *theory* of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding and I had

*implemented* non-directive skills... So: I would think well of myself (positive self-regard based on an introjected value from an external locus of evaluation) and be well thought of by my assessors - be they peers or facilitators (needs for positive regard relying upon an external locus of evaluation) if I could demonstrate *using* (though not necessarily *being*) the core conditions. In other words, congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding became things I should do well if I were to be validated as a good, competent, safe client-centred therapist.

So although I believe that very early on in my training I really *experienced* profound empathic understanding of another ... my *communication* of that empathic appreciation of another left something to be desired.

I thought of what I voiced as 'responses' – another person would express something and I would respond to that something via reflecting or paraphrasing or... Oh, some skill or technique or another. This feels somewhat like the tennis match referred to earlier in this paper - in which the client always served and I would receive their service and attempt to return it. This was 'sold' to me as client-centred, of course – because the client served first at all times, and I received and followed - response after response after response after response... Sometimes I would be penned back of the court, never moving far from the baseline – on the back foot. Sometimes I would be lobbing, sometimes volleying, sometimes dropping, sometimes smashing... Sometimes I would be right up close to the net – and at other times passing and being passed altogether. And that's not to mention spin! Anyway: glad to be of service!

Again, though, there was a feeling of incompleteness, of dissatisfaction, of hollowness and emptiness – a lack of vibrancy and enrichment...

Yet when I eventually 'truly went for it' and *communicated* my sensed empathic appreciation of the other person, *that* was truly powerful – at least as powerful as when I experienced the *receiving* of empathic understanding from a client-centred therapist.

It seems to me that all during the time when I attempted to communicate empathic understanding via skills and techniques (no matter how non-directive) there was a huge chunk missing. However, a stunning shift occurred within me when the core conditions as introjected values became no longer introjections, *but instead became integrated, embedded parts of the naturally empathic inner me*. No longer need I ‘set my self aside’ – because the core conditions were so fundamentally enshrined in my way of being *I could be me*. And, with exercise, my empathy muscle became strong enough over the years to carry my own baggage without having to leave it somewhere or, indeed, dump it on someone else.

### *Imperfection*

Funny enough, a few days later I had another experience... I momentarily ‘lost it’. With some shame, I recall how I said, with not a little passion: “with all respect, you’re talking bollocks!” Ho hum. Not a great deal of empathic understanding, eh? Not a great deal of respect, wouldn’t you say? I do realise that when I am my most defensive I am also my least empathic. I do not wish to ‘set aside’ my passion, however. *And nor need I set aside my passion*. As I see it, my passion was not ‘the problem’ – and I stand by my beliefs as I experienced them at that time.

No – ‘the problem’ was my *defensiveness*. I felt, in the moment, a strong urge (another ‘eruption’, if you will) to *disassociate myself* from remarks made in the name of a label (*‘client-centred’*, as it happens) that I also assigned within my own self-concept. ‘Attack became the best form of defence’, as they say – and in disassociating myself from what I experienced as an assault on my client-centredness, I also became temporarily disassociated from my empathic way of being. I believe that I ‘recovered myself’ fairly quickly – and, once I had become more whole again, I could engage with others in a more meaningful and enriching (for them and for me) way. I did not have to deny my passion in order to access my empathy – rather, my passion and my compassion

once again belonged to each other. It kind of feels like my ‘self’ that was *recovered* was my empathic self. Yet – wonderfully - it also feels like my self that was *doing the recovering* is also empathic at heart. There is, then, no conflict between these selves – they are friends, allies – they can live in harmony and be at peace, live and be as one.

I was watching a video of Carl Rogers recently.<sup>3</sup> The interviewer asked Carl about his often quoted saying “What I am is good enough”. Carl talked about this maxim being a guide through his life, saying that what he is *is* good enough – and that what he is is an imperfect human being. But “imperfect people achieve astonishing things – especially when they are aware that they are imperfect.” I like that!

At the beginning of this piece I wrote of how in the early days of a training group “one person shares something, another responds with ‘this is how it is for me’ (often in the name of ‘being congruent!’)” Well: if the core conditions are *not* fundamentally integrated into the whole person (in other words, if unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding are akin to learned or taught introjected values) then responding with ‘this is how it is for me’ may well be, to some degree, congruent...

... And remember - a further consequence of this ‘setting aside’ might be a *divided or incomplete* presence with others – in that certain aspects of the self have to be (or need to be, or are) ‘sacrificed’ in order for unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding to be experienced and offered.

If, however, the core conditions *are* fundamentally integrated into the whole person (and perhaps this integration is most likely through processes of both experiencing the core conditions *from* another *and* from inner experiencing and offering of the core conditions *to* another) then my respectful and empathic ways of being erupt and we can truly engage in an enriching encounter with one another.

I remember a Center for Studies of the Person discussion group. People were talking about what it meant to belong to their person-centred gathering. One person said:

“To belong to most communities you have to *sacrifice* something of yourself.

To belong to this community, you simply have to *be* yourself.”

Yes – and I cannot be a complete, unified, integrated community of *my* selves if I am sacrificing parts of me. I need to *be* me – a me that lives and breathes unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding in therapeutic encounters – a me that truly *is* (or more accurately, authentically *strives to be*) respectful and empathic.

And this is no sacrifice and I am no martyr.

Rather, I become enriched and fulfilled – I grow through being the empathic me.

And so can you.