Core Principles of the Person Centered Approach

I have observed several times that descriptions by person centered organizations of their purpose do not state what, for me, are the most essential and valuable characteristics of the person-centered approach. There are certain values and principles that are central and unique to person centered practices and organizations, that identify these practices and organizations as person centered, and that distinguish them clearly from those that are not.

I believe that it is important to clarify and describe these core person-centered principles and values, whether they are the ones that are presented here or others. I see them as necessary for guiding and developing our own person centered activities and, especially, so that others who are unfamiliar with this approach may understand its unique character and its possible importance for them in their own lives and work.

This is a brief statement of two elements that for me are the foundation of person-centered activities, whether therapy, facilitation, training, teaching, consulting or group organization. In my opinion these, more than any others, give such activities their unique person centered characteristics. They are the principles of self direction and of mutuality.

Foremost is the principle of self-direction of the client or participant. Self-direction is based on the value of individual autonomy and self-responsibility as most conducive to personal and social fulfillment and affirming the worth of the individual human being. The person-centered therapist (facilitator, trainer, teacher, supervisor, consultant, and so forth) seeks to foster self-direction and self-responsibility of the client (student, trainee, member, participant, consultee), within the constraints of the social situation.

Specific characteristics of person-centered therapy training and practice are based on this fundamental principle of self-direction. For example, in person-centered training programs this means that individual trainees are given responsibility for determining their own goals, learning processes, evaluation procedures, schedules, resource utilization, and their relations with trainers, fellow trainees and clients, to the largest extent possible within the social context of the activity or program.

The principle of mutuality complements that of self-direction. Decisions regarding the trainee and the program are made in an open atmosphere of mutuality,
consensus and equality, regardless of status. For person-centered organizations the meeting of the community as a whole, rather than a particular person or subgroup, holds the fundamental decision-making authority regarding the program, again within the limits of the social or institutional context.

Learning how to apply these principles successfully is a gradual process. Persons unfamiliar with self direction and mutuality may be hesitant to accept them because they are unfamiliar with the process of learning and growth that occurs when they are conscientiously applied. In my experience, organizations that have a basic commitment to the principles find that the skills and understanding required for self-direction and mutuality grow year by year. Matters which seem beyond the application of the approach become successfully managed as persons gain in their understanding, creativity and skills in the application of the core principles. Many persons find that self-direction and mutuality then become more successfully expressed in their own lives as well.

Ferdinand van der Veen
9/30/98, rev. 5/7/06