
Encountering the Sacred: Person-centered therapy as a spiritual practice

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Abstract. An authentic search for the sacred has been an integral part of person-centered psychotherapy. As he grew older Rogers (1980) realized that it made good sense to give spirituality a greater voice in psychotherapy. Gendlin (1984) highlighted the remarkable role of bodily felt knowing in developing an awareness of spirit. What is felt in the human organism increasingly leads to a broadening of the experiential field and a discovery of meaning. Moments of change are very different in nature and sometimes they appear as peak experiences or sacred moments that nourish the soul. The psychotherapeutic relationship and the experiencing process point in the direction of a deeper cosmic process and involve a sense of transcendence: the experience that life is infused with sacredness and individuals are essentially spiritual beings. Recent studies have shown that people who receive some form of therapy that integrates spirituality make significant positive changes in their lives.

Key words: spirituality, sacred, body, soul, transcendent

Dem Heiligen begegnen: Personzentrierte Therapie als spirituelle Praxis

Authentisches Suchen nach dem Heiligen war schon immer ein integraler Bestandteil Personzentrierter Psychotherapie. Als Rogers (1980) älter wurde, erkannte er, dass es sinnvoll ist, der Spiritualität in der Psychotherapie einen größeren Platz einzuräumen. Gendlin (1984) hob die bedeutsame Rolle des Körperwissens hervor, wenn es darum geht, ein Bewusstsein für Geistiges zu entwickeln. Was im menschlichen Organismus gefühlt wird, führt in wachsendem Maß zu einer Erweiterung des Erfahrungsfeldes und zur Entdeckung von Sinn. Momente der Veränderung sind in ihrer Art sehr verschieden und manchmal erscheinen sie als Ausnahmeerfahrungen oder heilige Momente, die die Seele nähren. Die psychotherapeutische Beziehung und der Erfahrungsprozess deuten in Richtung eines tieferen kosmischen Prozesses und beinhalten ein Gespür für Transzendenz: die Erfahrung, dass das Leben von Heiligem durchwirkt ist und dass jeder Einzelne im Kern ein spirituelles Wesen ist. Jüngere Studien zeigen, dass Menschen die eine die Spiritualität integrierende Therapie bekommen, wesentliche positive Veränderungen in ihrem Leben durchlaufen.

Encontrando lo sagrado: La terapia centrada en la persona centrada como una práctica espiritual

Una búsqueda auténtica de lo sagrado ha sido una parte integral de la psicoterapia centrada en la persona.

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A medida que se hacía mayor Rogers (1980) se dio cuenta que tenía sentido darle a la espiritualidad una voz más fuerte en la psicoterapia. Gendlin (1984) destacó el papel notable del conocimiento sentido en el cuerpo en el desarrollo de una conciencia del espíritu. Lo que se siente en el organismo humano cada vez más conduce a un ensanchamiento del campo experiencial y a un descubrimiento de significado. Los momentos del cambio son muy diferentes en naturaleza y aparecen a veces como experiencias pico o momentos sagrados que alimentan el alma. La relación psicoterapéutica y el proceso experiencial apuntan en la dirección de un proceso cósmico más profundo que involucra un sentido de trascendencia: la experiencia de que la vida está infundida con lo sagrado y las personas son esencialmente seres espirituales. Estudios recientes han demostrado que las personas que reciben un tipo de terapia que integre la espiritualidad realizan cambios positivos significativos en sus vidas.

La Rencontre du Sacré : La thérapie centrée sur la personne en tant que pratique spirituelle

Une recherche constante et authentique du sacré fait partie intégrante de la psychothérapie centrée sur la personne. En vieillissant, Rogers (1980) s'est rendu compte que donner une voix plus importante à la spiritualité dans la psychothérapie avait du sens. Gendlin (1984) a souligné le rôle remarquable du savoir du sens corporel dans le développement d'une conscience de l'esprit. Ce sens corporel chez l'organisme humain facilite, de manière croissante, un élargissement du champ expérientiel et une découverte de sens. Des moments de mouvements peuvent être de natures très différentes et peuvent être donc vécus comme des expériences essentielles, ou comme des moments sacrés qui nourrissent l'âme. La relation psychothérapeutique et le processus d'experiencing indiquent un processus cosmique très profond parce qu'empreint de transcendance: l'expérience étant que la vie est insufflée par le sacré et que les individus sont essentiellement des êtres spirituels. Des études récentes démontrent que les personnes ayant accédé à une forme de thérapie qui intègre la spiritualité mettent en place des changements positifs significatifs dans leurs vies.

Encontro com o Sagrado: A Terapia Centrada no Cliente enquanto prática espiritual

A procura autêntica do sagrado tem sido parte integrante da psicoterapia centrada na pessoa. À medida que envelhecia, Carl Rogers (1980) deu-se conta que fazia sentido atribuir maior relevo à espiritualidade na psicoterapia. Gendlin (1984) destacou o papel notável do conhecimento do corpo sentido (*bodily felt*) no desenvolvimento de uma maior tomada de consciência do espírito. Aquilo que é sentido pelo organismo humano conduz ao alargamento do campo experiencial e à descoberta de sentido. Os momentos de mudança têm naturezas muito distintas e aparecem por vezes como experiências de clímax ou momentos sagrados que alimentam a alma. A relação terapêutica e o processo experiencial apontam no sentido de um processo cósmico mais profundo e envolvem um sentimento de transcendência: a experiência de que a vida é imbuída pelo sagrado e de que os indivíduos são essencialmente seres espirituais. Estudos recentes demonstraram que as pessoas sujeitas a alguma forma de terapia que integre a espiritualidade, são alvo de mudanças positivas significativas nas suas vidas.

聖なるものとの出会い：スピリチュアルな実践としてのパーソンセンタードセラピー

聖なるものの希求は、パーソンセンタードセラピーにおいて、これまで重要な部分であった。ロジャーズは年齢を重ねるにつれ、セラピーにおけるスピリチュアリティの重要性をより認識するようになっていった。ジェンドリンは、霊性への気づきを深める上で、身体感覚に内在する英知が非常に重要な役割を果たすとした。人間という有機体の内的感覚は、経験的場の拡大や意味の発見を促進するのである。変化の瞬間とは、本来非常に際だった経験であり、その瞬間は至高体験や魂を癒す聖なる瞬間として現れる。セラピーにおける関係性や体験過程のプロセスは、深遠な宇宙のプロセスや超越の感覚へとつながりうる。それはつまり、命とは聖なる祝福を受けており、人間とは本来スピリチュアルな存在である、という経験である。これらの知見を裏付けるように、近年の研究では、スピリチュアリティを何らかの形で統合したセラピーを受けたクライアントは、彼らの生き方に大きな肯定的変化を生み出したと報告されている。

Ontmoeting met het sacrale: Persoongerichte therapie als spirituele praktijk

Een authentieke zoektocht naar het sacrale is altijd impliciet deel geweest van de persoonsgerichte benadering. Naarmate Rogers (1980) ouder werd, nam ook zijn belangstelling voor de spirituele dimensie in psychotherapie toe. Gendlin (1984) verlegde de klemtoon naar de rol van het lichaam in het ervaren van het transcendente. Wat voelbaar is als een lichamelijke ervaring, kan toegang geven tot een zelfoverstijgend veld van betekenis. Veranderingsmomenten in therapie zijn soms piekervaringen die voedend zijn voor de ziel. De therapeutische relatie en het ervaringsproces wijzen in de richting van een groter kosmisch proces: de beleving dat het leven heilig is en dat mensen in essentie spirituele wezens zijn. Recent onderzoek toont aan cliënten significant meer vooruitgang boeken in therapie wanneer de spirituele dimensie geïntegreerd is in de behandeling.

At the first conference on client-centered and experiential psychotherapy in 1988, a colleague, Van Belle (1990), complained about Rogers' (1980) later move toward what he called *mystical universalism*. At that time, Van Belle was no exception: Many therapists tried to separate spirituality from therapy. There was a deep tradition of separating the spiritual from psychotherapy. In recent decades there has been a sharp increase in open conversation on the topic of spirituality in psychotherapy. Thorne (2002) speaks of the mystical power of person-centered therapy. He believes that history will show Rogers to be one of the major influences on the spiritual evolution of twenty-first century humanity. The international conference on "Spiritual Dimensions in Therapy and Experiential Exploration" in 2004 was an acknowledgment of spirituality's crucial role in human growth and healing — many presenters placed the topic high on the agenda of the person-centered approach (Moore & Purton, 2006). How do we account for this change? Perhaps it reflects the yearning for a psychology that touches the deeper levels of what it means to be human. Perhaps it is also an indication that, in spite of advances in the field, some critical ingredients have been missing. And of course it reflects the growing body of research that points to spirituality as a potent predictor of health and well-being (Pargament, 2007). Many people regard spirituality as crucially important to them, but find it hard to define the term. From their study of the literature Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders (1988) present this definition: "It is a way of being and experiencing that comes through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate" (p. 10).

My hypothesis is that encountering sacred aspects of human life is one of the critical ingredients of good psychotherapy. Psychotherapy can become sacred when people experience positive interpersonal qualities and/or connect at a bodily felt level with something greater than themselves. The sacred is a quality of experiencing life. It has to do with value, depth, wonder, reverence, touching the soul or the life force. The character of psychotherapy can be deepened and enriched, even transformed, when the sacred is invited and the spiritual dimension is addressed in therapy.

A vignette from psychotherapy might illustrate how the sacred comes to live in an ordinary session. This is not a typically spiritual session, because spirituality can express itself in so many ways. The client came to me because she was touched by my openness in one of

my publications. In particular, she derived from it that I am in touch with the transcendent. Even though she has a lot of therapy experience, there are many things she never dared to talk about. She had always been ashamed to say that she has hallucinations, that she hears voices. It means a lot to her that she can open up with me without having to fear that a pathological label will be attached to her. On the contrary, my mildness helps her to give the strange phenomena meaning in their context. This brings a huge sense of relief, as she never felt understood and accepted on such a profound level before. Then she remembers a dream. In this dream she finds herself in a big crowd. A blind man with a dog is walking in the opposite direction, against the flow of the crowd. She tries to stop the dog. Gently but firmly the dog pushes her hand away and continues to lead the man against the crowd. Focusing on these images, the dog symbolizes the meaning of strength in herself that she can trust and that can lead her away from the rush. To accomplish this, she needs to push her ego aside, or else she will continue to look for approval in the outside world. Like the dog, she has extraordinary sight and hearing. This instinctive creature brings her wordlessly to her destination. The dream images result in an experience of deep inner peace, strength, and beauty. She also experiences herself as part of a larger natural order. She discovers that if she can exist respecting her vulnerability she feels more in contact with her inner strength and comes closer to the source of life. She left with a sense of mystical awe, and an experience of intense energy and grounding. Afterwards she describes the session as a sacred experience with a powerful and fortifying effect. It was experienced as fundamentally healing.

The emotional experience of the sacred provides people with the most compelling of spiritual pathways (Pargament, 2007). The critical ingredients of the therapeutic encounter: acceptance, empathy and congruence, can be perceived in sacred terms: love, compassion, authenticity. Thus spirituality can unfold in the therapeutic relationship. By caring for clients, therapists may experience themselves as participating in a sacred activity. Martin Buber (1970), the philosopher who distinguished between two types of relationship, I–It and I–Thou, emphasized that people can respond to any aspect of life as a *Thou*. In this kind of I–Thou relationship people come close to an encounter with the divine. Rogers (1989) was a master in making explicit the conditions for inviting the sacredness into relationships, although he did not name it as such. Later in his life he became more and more intrigued by the sacred moments that occasionally occurred in the therapeutic encounter. In a dialogue with the theologian Paul Tillich he admitted: “I feel at times when I’m really being helpful to a client of mine . . . there is something approximating an I–Thou relationship between us, then I feel as though I am somehow in tune with the forces of the universe or that forces are operating through me in regard to this helping relationship” (Rogers, 1989, p. 74). In my experience, the larger field of the transpersonal is palpable in the room in those moments of profound meeting when client and therapist are expressing their soul. When we say that the relationship heals, this is another way of expressing that there is soul-to-soul contact. I prefer the word *soul* because — different from the word *person* — the soul includes the personal and the transpersonal dimensions of an individual.

The immediate encounter with the sacred is more than a matter of the mind; it is deeply bodily felt and it is hard to put it into words. Rogers (1961) discovered that when a person

truly listens to another, the process of growth and development is set free. By providing empathy, respect, caring, acceptance, and honesty, the therapist nurtures the client's soul. Rogers did not speak of the soul as far as I know. However he made rudimentary observations of bodily felt senses, for example in the following statements: "Therapy seems to mean a getting back to basic sensory and visceral experience" (Rogers, 1961, p. 103); "The client is hit by a feeling — not something named or labeled — but an experience of an unknown something which has to be cautiously explored before it can be named at all" (ibid., p. 129). This is like the soul that vibrates within the person when something touches the deeper levels of experience. Gendlin complemented the interpersonal person-centered approach by his experiential approach in which the bodily felt experience becomes more the focus of attention and is referred to as a significant phenomenon (Ikemi, 2005). The internal point of reference is described by Gendlin (1984) as the *felt sense*: "The edge of awareness; a sense of more than one says and knows, an unclear, fuzzy, murky sense of a whole situation, that comes in the middle of the body" (Gendlin, 1984, p. 79). Gendlin was also explicit about how psychotherapy sometimes opens an extraordinary doorway into the realm of spiritual awareness. "The felt sense comes between the conscious person and the deep universal reaches of human nature" (ibid., p. 81). So the human body plays a remarkable role in developing an awareness of spirit. What is felt in the human organism increasingly leads to a broadening of the experiential field and a finding of meaning. When we own what is really felt, our body connects to a Larger Body and it shifts into a new space. Out of that connection we receive new information, which in different spiritual practices is called *revelation*, and new energy, which in different traditions is referred to as *grace*. The felt sensing body is connected to the whole universe. This could be named *BioSpirituality* in order to highlight the unique role of the body's knowing in the ongoing human journey into spirit (Lou, 2007).

As psychotherapy experiences accumulate, people tend to move in the direction of having a characteristic attitude.

One has the ability to accept surrender at a moment's notice, trusting something larger than oneself to assert true and accurate representations of reality ... this attitude of sacredness seems very much a part of healing and growing experiences ... By an attitude of sacredness, I mean a respect for the unknown and a respect for the meaning in pain and unpleasant experiences, as well as in pleasant experiences. This attitude involves something like faith that what one feels and experiences can become part of a constructive life process if one approaches it properly and is willing to learn. (Iberg, 1996, p. 37)

The psychotherapeutic relationship and the experiencing process point in the direction of a deeper cosmic process and involve a sense of transcendence, including states of love and compassion; of clarity and truth; the experience that life is infused with sacredness and individuals are essential spiritual beings. Thus, in the middle of an ordinary external life, a person may feel carried along in an exciting inner adventure that is unique to each individual, which may contain an inexhaustible source of caring for oneself and the world, which may

lead to increased self-confidence and confidence in the mystery of life, which refers to more than our human thoughts can encompass (Campbell & McMahon, 1985).

When he grew older Rogers (1980) recognized: “Our experiences in therapy 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” (p. 130). In his portrayal of *the person of tomorrow* Rogers comes forward with his yearning for the spiritual as he describes this person as a spiritual seeker. This kind of person wishes to find meaning and purpose in life that is greater than the individual. Although Rogers perceived sacred realities in his life and recognized that he was dealing with transcendent matters, he did not move spirituality from the background of psychotherapy to the foreground. Perhaps if he had been still alive in the nineties, he would have joined the movement towards *spiritually oriented psychotherapy* (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005) because his way of doing psychotherapy was a spiritual practice.

An authentic search for the sacred has always been an integral part of person-centered/experiential psychotherapy. The choices are to make no mention of spiritual resources or to be more explicit about the spiritual components of the person-centered approach. Virtually any aspect of therapy can be seen through the lens of sacred qualities. The building of a deep connection with someone is very often based on the sharing of sacred experiences. I consider psychotherapy as entering a sacred space where the transcendent is invited.

The transcendent dimension may, but does not necessarily, involve a deity or higher power ... “Transcendent” means moving beyond one’s former frame of reference in a direction of higher or broader scope. The transcendent dimension, found in all human beings, involves moving beyond one’s own unhealthy egocentricity, duality, and exclusively towards more healthy egocentricity, unity and capacity to love. (Hinterkopf, 1996, p. 10)

Many times therapy has provided peak experiences for me and my clients, at which times it felt as if we were encountering the sacred and opening ourselves to the transcendent dimension of life. Peak experiences are poignant moments, often characterized by intense emotions or feelings of gratitude and awe. They tend to affect clients and therapists more deeply, and produce significant changes. “Peak experiences transport us out of ordinary consciousness into a higher dimension of being, providing us with glimpses of a transcendent reality and allowing us to touch ultimate values such as truth, beauty, goodness, and love” (Elkins, 2001, p. 203).

A small vignette can make this more concrete. Performance anxiety brings a young woman to therapy. Whenever she is asked to play music in public, her hands start shaking so badly that she is no longer able to play the piano. We explore how in her self-experience, she locks herself up in the physical dimension (van Deurzen, 1997) when she starts fearing that her hands will not be able to find the right keys. In the social dimension she has no need whatsoever for the admiration of an audience for her musical talent. In the psychological dimension she experiences music as a game in which she can fully indulge when she is alone. It is an important source of satisfaction. A dramatic change occurred when the therapist asked her how she would feel from a spiritual perspective if she imagined that she may play

music for an audience. She suddenly felt that the beauty of music was a divine gift, and that filled her with gratitude. A week after this session, she reported about a performance during which she had imagined that “Mary” was playing and singing through her. This performance had become a peak experience during which the audience no longer appeared to be a critical judging ear, but a supporting presence. Ever since that moment, her performance anxiety completely disappeared.

In this session the client was encouraged to make a perceptual shift by which she could see her anxiety through the larger lens of the sacred. A number of studies have shown that people who receive some form of therapy that integrates spirituality make positive changes. For example, Richards, Hardman, and Berrett (2007) studied 122 women with eating disorders in an inpatient setting. They compared the effectiveness of three treatments: a spirituality group, a cognitive group, and an emotional support group. In comparison to the two other groups, the spiritual group showed greater improvement in eating attitudes and well-being, and significantly greater declines in symptom distress, relationship distress, and social role conflict.

My conclusion is that nowadays it has become clear that there is no longer any need to separate the spiritual dimension from the psychotherapy process as if it were a subject so esoteric that it falls outside the bounds of effective treatment. Research suggests that Rogers (1980) discovered something of ultimate value and truth and that it makes good sense to give spirituality a greater voice in psychotherapy. Human personality and spirituality exist on the same continuum and a more complete psychotherapy would encompass the entire continuum (Elkins, 2005). Psychotherapy may involve very meaningful experiences but also more mundane moments, and spirituality covers a broader territory, including not just the sacred, but all of life, even its most profane parts. Moments of change are very different in nature and sometimes they appear as peak experiences or spiritual moments that nourish the soul. My imagination is that in the future it will become as natural to talk about sacred or spiritual experiences in psychotherapy as it is to mention emotions or cognitions. A new task for future generations might be to extend the theory and practice of person-centered therapy by exploring the spiritual dimension of human development in a way only hinted at by Rogers.

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