

GAINING THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE: A TRIBUTE TO CARL ROGERS AND AHP

- Bob Edelstein, LMFT, MFT©
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I read Freedom to Learn by Carl Rogers in 1971, and my life dramatically changed. He stated that each of us knows what is best for ourselves, and what the good life is. He said the best way to discover your truth is to give a central focus and value to what you experience in your inner life, and to listen to the wisdom that comes from your inner promptings, your intuition. He said we need to listen and trust our inner voice, and by doing so we can be optimally self-directed in our lives. We need to let life unfold from our inner world to our outer world and to take what happens in our outer world and notice how it impacts our inner world. This gives us the freedom to discover our life and to find out who we are and who we want to be in the world.

Shortly thereafter, around 1973, I learned about and joined the Association for Humanistic Psychology. The AHP has profoundly impacted my life since then. In the 1970's I attended regional and national conferences where I heard and met many of the Humanistic Psychology pioneers, my heroes, up close and personal. This included Rollo May, Carl Rogers, Virginia Satir, Jean Houston, and Jim Bugental, among others. I got to know the other participants in the conferences I attended, and discovered many kindred spirits. As the years passed, my experience of community and connection progressed, and in the 1990's I joined local kindred spirits to form and maintain the AHP-Oregon Community. I am very grateful for this experience, for the deep friendships I made, the stimulating ideas we explored, the intimate sharing that took place, and the extended family my daughter had from the sixth grade until she graduated from high school.

It is my honor to acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the birth of Carl Rogers and the 40th anniversary of the AHP. The values I have learned from them still, after thirty-one years, stir my passions deeply and give me a sense of inner security to rest upon. I have defined my life's purpose in terms of living, facilitating, and promoting the values of the Existential- Humanistic Perspective. I want to honor the Association for Humanistic Psychology and Carl Rogers by describing some of these values.

This perspective stands for staying open to the flow of life, its process and its content. Within this openness to the flow of life, I make stands. It is part of being an active participant in life's events to help shape the world as I would want it. I make stands that are important to me. Within this context, I live in the paradox that nothing is for certain, in terms of both possibilities and limits. Both of these variables are subject to change. Therefore, contingency is always present. Yet, I do not let this deter me from consciously deciding my life.

This perspective stands for living a life of integrity and wholeness. It means that I listen to the unity that is me. If I feel split and fragmented, I listen and stay open to all of what is my splitting and my fragmenting until magically, mystically, I start shifting into a more unified perspective and clarity on whatever the issue is.

This perspective stands for believing I am enough and that the world is enough, too. It stands for possibility and potential. Implicit in life is that there are always further possibilities, even if we have no idea at times what those further possibilities are. It is about being and becoming, always both. It cannot be any other way.

This perspective stands for the belief that we are all connected in spirit to the world, and everyone and everything in it. Therefore, every time I heal some of my pain, I am also healing some of the world's pain, and every time I focus on healing some of the world's pain, I am healing some of my own pain. It is knowing that I am not separate from anyone or anything. We are, now and always, inherently connected.

This perspective stands for believing there is something greater than ourselves, whether we call it God, Higher Power, Allah, Buddha, Christ, or the Life Force. There is something greater than our personality or ego that we need to stay open to — the big I.

This perspective stands for being open-hearted and clear-minded. It is about loving every human being for all of who they are -- all of their struggles and successes, all of their joys and pains, and also loving ourselves in the same way.

This perspective stands for embracing the shadows, and honoring that those darker aspects of ourselves are part of us as well. Our darker sides need to be valued and understood. In the exploration of our shadows, we come to terms with our shadows in an accepting, integrated, holistic way. By looking at it and facing it head-on, we acknowledge that our shadow self is an integral part of our human condition and take responsibility for it. If we don't do this as individuals, our collective shadow gets acted out in the world, often in ugly, horrific ways.

This perspective stands for living in the moment as compared to for the moment, for that is all we have. In this moment, the past and future are embodied, and yet it is only in the aliveness of the present moment that it really means anything. This excites me very much, for it means every moment is worth living, regardless of the outcome. While the result that comes from the moment is to be valued as well, what is most important and passionate to me, is that I want to be aware and conscious of how I feel, what I think, and how I act in each and every moment. This makes life vital.

This perspective stands for giving me permission to be myself, to be authentic. Rather than being a selfish act, it holds that we as human beings, if supported to be our authentic selves, will ultimately act in the best interest of self, each other, our community, and the planet as a whole. This gives me a sense of hope for our collective future.

This perspective stands for having relationships of honesty, openness, and mutuality. In holding this intention, if we stick with the process, whether that is in relationship with a spouse, a family member, or a friend, or within a national or international context, good will eventually come out of it. Fresh discoveries will be made, deepening will occur individually and collectively, and intimacy will happen.

This perspective stands for the belief that human beings are innately good, and that we naturally move toward growth and self-actualization. Thus, within this perspective, personal growth happens when any defenses which hinder our growth are peeled back so that the authentic self emerges. It is a letting go process, not an adding on process. That is why a major aim of Existential Humanistic Psychotherapy is to create a safe, honest, trusting environment, where the client is able to peel back defense mechanisms that keep them from richer, more fulfilled living. The therapist guides and supports this sculpting process. This gives me a sense of optimism about the ongoing evolution of the human race.

This perspective stands for life being an ongoing learning process, never to be completed, for

there is always more, always further discoveries we can make about ourselves, our lives, and the world. In this outlook, we need to stay open to the idea that life does not have to be as it is, just because that is the way it has been. We are always and forever evolving, individually and collectively.

This perspective stands for the belief that we are constantly choosing our existence, our living, in each and every moment. We are the authors of our own experience, our own life. We do not have to be a victim of life's circumstances. Victor Frankl exemplified this while living in the Dachau concentration camp during World War II. In these dire circumstances, he did not know the plight of his family members, or if he would ever see them alive again. Yet, in the face of this horror, he decided to keep alive by finding compassion for his fellow prisoners and creating hope about his future.

I attempt to embody these values in my personal and professional life. It is easier in my professional life, for it is part of my role as an existential humanistic therapist. I am grateful that I choose this role, for it pulls me to live these values every day. Living these values in my personal life is more difficult. It is more of a challenge in being with my wife, with my daughter, with my close friends, with my family of origin, with organizations I am part of, and with the general public. I am more visible and more vulnerable. It is easier to be less aware of my shadow sides surfacing. At these times, I have to work harder to intentionally live these values. Yet, I am aware that at 52, I live more of the time with integrity and authenticity and I am a lot better at living a seamless existence in my professional and personal life than I was when I first discovered Carl Rogers and the Association for Humanistic Psychology. We are always continually growing.

I believe these values apply more than ever to our present world. I believe the September 11th tragedy involved heroes and wake-up calls. These heroes included, among others, the firemen, the policemen, and the emergency rescue workers who saved so many lives, risking and at times losing their lives in the process. This was a major wake-up call for us as individuals and at every level of our society. I feel it pulls us to evaluate comprehensively how we can act more in the direction of Abraham Maslow's being values. This includes living with justice, goodness, truth, and wholeness, rather than connecting at the lowest common denominator, that of violence and terrorism.

I am so grateful for my heroes within the existential humanistic perspective and for the wake-up calls that I have received through the values that they teach and live. I want to offer my thanks to the Association for Humanistic Psychology and to Carl Rogers for what they have given me and for what in turn I am able to pass on to others. My hope is that the existential humanistic values continue to live within me, within others, and within the world and that they keep getting stronger.