

Can I believe in the Actualizing Tendency?

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Introduction

As I stood on the top of Friars' Crag in the English Lake District with a friend from San Diego, I noticed a tear in his eye. I interpreted it as a response to my words and what was around us. Around us was one of the most magnificent views of lake and mountain scenery I have seen in the world. Sunlight on the water, cloud over Scafell (England's highest mountain) seen through the Jaws of Borrowdale. Nearby was a stone engraved with some of Ruskin's words saying that his nurse had brought him here as a child and for the first time he was struck that God had created all things, magnificent things. We stood there looking and witnessing this awesome sight, when I said that even though I don't particularly believe in God and half joking, "Hey, look at what He created, and hey, um, I guess He created me, too." That's when I noticed the tear in his eye as he looked at me. I took that look to mean, "Yes, it is so hard for you to see the wonder of yourself."

Can I Believe?

Although I struggle with the term "god," because the word can mean many very different things to people (things worth fighting and killing over), I prefer the term "actualizing tendency" (AT). But can I really believe in this?

The central belief for person-centered counselling is the actualizing tendency. Some people seem to understand the repercussions of this. My teaching and supervision experience in the U.K. is that many people who have been trained in the approach are

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not very aware of the repercussions of this belief and think that the person-centered approach is more to do with the core conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. For those of you who want to see my rather laboured study of this, I would be happy to send you a copy (1999).

My concern right now is: Can I believe in the actualizing tendency? I would like to propose here that if I can believe in the AT, the core conditions will occur naturally. The horse goes before the cart, not the other way around. Therefore, the emphasis here is on the AT.

What is the AT? An observable process in each living thing which demonstrates its own tendency or ability to actualize or to grow; to actually discover that there is something inside (rather than outside) each living thing that knows what to do next; often observed in a sprouting seed or a newborn kitten or child.

I would like to float two other questions:

1. Can I believe that the AT exists in my clients?
2. Can I believe that the AT exists in me?

1. From my experience as a practitioner, I have witnessed many times the positive results of offering my clients the core conditions. However, my experience suggests that the core conditions come into play naturally if the practitioner believes in the existence of the AT. To focus on the core conditions without a belief in the AT can limit the therapeutic impact that only the AT can provide. The more I hang on in there with a belief in the client's AT, the more likely they are to start to believe in themselves. Often I hear them say near the beginning of therapy, "I don't know who I am; I don't know what I want." Near the end they often begin to say things like, "This is what I want," "This is what I don't want," "This is who I am," and "I feel I have found myself." They seem to be applying the core conditions to themselves. I am then dispensable to their process. The more effectively I practice my belief in their company, the quicker they will move on, thus the more effective my therapy. I have observed that my attempts to intervene in their process can only delay matters. My attempts to intervene are usually come from my own discomfort at staying with the process. The client's discomfort can be accepted because often they

have never been allowed to experience such discomfort fully because many “helpful” people like to intervene and offer something. In relationship to my children, for instance, I can be experienced as one of those helpful people. To stop such “helpfulness” from getting in the way and delaying or even stopping their process of finding their own ability to actualize (to actually discover that there is something inside them that knows what to do next), I must become more aware of myself.

2. If it exists in my clients then surely it exists in all other human beings, and perhaps in all living things. If it is in all living things, then it is in me. That, for me, is the hardest bit to believe.

I have worked with this belief for so long and prior to learning the full meaning of the term AT, I had a feeling of this in my understanding of Krishnamurti and the Quakers and feeling comfortable with other people who shared these interests (Fallows, 1999). On one level I cannot deny that it exists in me, because it proclaims itself in the way I live; on another level, I deny it. Why do I deny it?

Yesterday, I was participating in a professional development group of counsellors meeting in my home and we were discussing a paper on “shame,” provided by another member of the group. Over the last several months, we have spent a long time looking at shame and examining its relationship with guilt. Shame can be more hidden than guilt and much harder to connect with, and even when connected with, it is harder than guilt to deal with. I have been aware for a long time of the way my father shamed me. But I have never realized that shame could have come from my mother—I idealized her after her early and unexpected death when I was 16. Of course, she would have passed on the socially useful aspects of shame, which help us to interact usefully with others in everyday activities. But I suddenly got in touch with something that surprised me. The loss of her at the age of 16 gave me a level of shame that I have carried to this day. I now ask another question: Can shame block the actualizing tendency?

If the AT is alive and well in me, why do I not allow myself to be seen by others? If it is shame blocking me, can I do anything about it? Or by my becoming aware of it have I already found a way of

expressing it (for instance in this paper, right now)? Can I actually complete this process, publish this paper and allow others to see me? Can I dare to become more visible? To move from the invisibility I have felt most of my life? Ruskin painted pictures of landscapes. I observed landscapes but was not aware that I was also in the picture. The observer and the landscape: Without one, how can the other be witnessed? Even if I did no more than observe, witness other human beings, the landscape; that is enough. As Milton wrote, “They also serve who only stand and wait” (1973, p. 1221). His sonnet has had a special place in my heart for 30 years. Why? His waiting was forced on him by his blindness. He could not see; I could not be seen. Was my waiting forced on me by my shame?

In an article I studied yesterday, Montgomery (2006, p. 75) says, “Shame imposes separation and creates loss... I believe that the dynamic can also operate the other way and that loss of a cherished other can induce shame; the self that cannot maintain its proximity/adherence to the other is experienced as deficient, however irrational this may be.... The natural processes of separation and disillusionment should occur gradually. Forced into a premature recognition of the separateness of itself from everything (i.e. its mother) introduces the ‘other’ (i.e. ‘not me’) in an intrusive way. This may lead to a split, with the development of the adaptive ‘false self’ designed to conceal a protected ‘true self’...” (p. 76). Apparently a very basic experience of shame is when the self reaches out and is met by an unresponsive and uncomprehending maternal environment and a chronic form of shame evolves a self to protect the self from the possibility of further shame “...to hide from the light of day.” (p. 76).

So let me conclude from this that due to the sudden loss of my mother at 16, I lost my maternal connection, which can never be replaced. There was a deficit in my life, I therefore felt deficient. Most people still had their mothers. My mother knew me better than anyone else. I lost her future attempts to comprehend and respond to me—as difficult as that may have been, especially if there was to be a period of separation and disillusionment. Such a loss may have been similar to a loss of the core conditions that had been in my life and someone who was prepared to wait and see the AT emerge in me. She had protected me from the judgmental and shaming actions of my father, which now

quickly obscured the shame I felt at the loss of her. In a matter of months, I had lost my family—my sister was chased away, the house was sold, and I was in the Royal Navy returning on leave to share a twin-bedded room with my father in boarding house. I had to visit my sister in secret. At 19, I was aware of really missing relating to women (my girlfriend went off with another man), and I left the Navy to live with my father. A few months later, after being unfairly criticized by my father, we wrestled; I won and left the twin-bedded room to live with my sister for a short time.

I am still alone at this point in my life. During my marriage, I was aware that as I approached my mother's age of death I irrationally and secretly thought I would die—and somehow, amid an affair and irresolvable arguments, I managed to remove myself from my family to live alone. Am I still protecting myself from further shame? And am I protecting others from depending on me, on my love? Am I invisibly waiting for death?

The only problem is that others do not see me as invisible. They respond to me and remind me that I am not invisible. And now I am writing this, which is visible to you, the reader.

Conclusion

I will now return in conclusion to the question, “Can I believe in the actualizing tendency?” I can and I do. In fact, while writing this I can see that it is more than a belief; it is an observable fact. However, I am aware that all those with a strong belief in whatever they believe might say exactly the same thing. My evidence is easier for me to apply to others than to myself. This more objective view can see the results in all living things (the seeds sprouting, the toddler walking) and in others, especially being in the privileged position of a counsellor to witness people change in their process and relationship with the AT—to see them grow. However, it is much harder to see my own process. There appears to be no beginning and no end to this process. It is a continual process; the actualizing process is always pushing me to take more baby steps along this path. And I don't even know if death is an end to this process.

In the introduction I wrote, “Yes, it is so hard for you to see the wonder of yourself.” I was looking and experiencing the wonder of nature. The experience of nature is in me. I am part of nature. And if I am wonderful just because I am, so is every other human being. Sometimes this wonder is obscured by the negative actions or desires of others and our selves. And this may be the subject of another article. Here, and now, I want to stay with and stress that my experience of wonder (or the AT) in myself allows me to be aware of the wonder in others, and although, like me, my clients may not see their own wonder, may not see their ability to actualize, I believe it is there.

References

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