

# PERSON-CENTERED ATTITUDES OR ACTIONS? CHARLEY THE STAR-KIST TUNA EXPLAINS IT ALL FOR YOU WITH THE HELP OF KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

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Poor Charley: He learns Swahili. He reads Shelley and Keats. He collects Picasso's Blue Period and hums obscure Charley Parker riffs. Nothing works. It's the same old thing. Each time he tries to enter tuna fish heaven a voice intones: "Sorry Charley; we don't want tunas with good taste; we want tunas that taste good."

The situation is the same for some of us, poor fish, trying to do person-centered psychotherapy. We do *stuff*: For example, we reflect feelings (Rogers, 1989); some of us evocatively reflect feelings (Rice, 1974); still others teach our clients to focus (Gendlin, 1978); and, we hear a voice saying: "Sorry, we don't want therapists who *do* something. We want therapists who *are* something." In this case the voice are *voices*, particularly Bozarth (e.g. 1992) and Brodley (1991)<sup>1</sup>. Their thrust is that to use any particular technique as a way of conducting person-centered therapy is to misunderstand Rogers. Instead, to be person-centered one must only be consistently empathic, congruent, and prizing. For example, Bozarth writes that in person-centered psychotherapy:

The therapist functions as a genuine person who experiences the attitudes of unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding toward the client and the client perceives these therapist attitudes.

The assumption is that if the therapist can be this way with the other person and that the person of the client, at least, minimally perceives these attitudes then therapeutic personality change will ensue. (p. 45)

"Don't do," He and Brodley seem to say, "Be."

Be what? Empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness or congruence are not simple states of mind. Here's what Rogers (1959) says of the first two:

*Empathy*. The state of empathy, or being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition. (pp 210-211)

*Unconditional positive regard*. . . if the self-experiences of another are perceived by me in such a way that no self-experience can be discriminated as more or less worthy of positive regard than any other, then I am experiencing unconditional positive regard for this individual. To perceive oneself as receiving unconditional positive regard is to perceive that of one's self-experiences none can be discriminated by the other individual as more or less worthy of positive regard.

Putting this in simpler terms, to feel unconditional positive regard toward another is to "prize" him. . . This means to value the person irrespective of the differential values which one might place on his specific behaviors. (p. 208)

Of *congruence*, Rogers (1961) writes: "when the psychotherapist is what he *is*, when in the relationship with his client he is genuine and without 'front' or facade, openly being the feelings and attitudes which at that moment are flowing in him." (p. 61)

In other words, be a well-adjusted saint.

But I'm not a saint. This morning I: (a) Ate the last chocolate chip cookie I knew my companion wanted. (b) Beat out someone else for a parking space. (c) Fraudulently dated a treatment summary. (d) Impatiently yelled at my child for spilling his dinner plate, (e) Had sexual thoughts about a woman I sat next to on the bus.

The thought of emanating positive regard, empathy, and congruence reminds me of a particularly ignominious day in my high school career. The teacher called on me to recite the dates of some significant Civil War battles when I hadn't read any of my history assignments for the last two weeks. As I stood there stuttering and blushing, Gertrude Stein's description of Oakland kept replaying in my brain (*I had* studied my English): "There's no there, there."

Since none of us are saints, how do we put the "there there"? That is, in the therapy hour how do we consistently summon the core conditions when outside of it most of us at best demonstrate them only inconsistently. We seemingly go from being the Clark Kent of our lives to a therapeutic Superman. Where's the phone booth? There are many possibilities. One of these is that the transformation is merely an act, an illusion. That is, as therapists we don't consistently exhibit the core conditions at all; instead, we simply demonstrate them more consistently than other intimates in our client's world. The argument runs, that's all we need do. It is our consistent empathy, prizing, and authenticity relative to others in client's world that are the active therapeutic ingredients. Two other related explanations stem from the time-limited and circumscribed object of the therapy hour. Taking the time limits of therapy first: The hour is just that, an hour. Afterwards I have nothing more to do with my client except to collect payment. Our relationship is the therapeutic equivalent of a shipboard romance except that it happens on a regular basis. Besides being time-limited, the object of the client-centered therapist is also a very narrow one. I don't want to have sex with my client, have her unclog my pipes or lend me money. I just want her to tell me what she wants to tell me in the way she wants to do it – and for her to pay her bill.

While these and possibly other explanations are plausible, I think there is a more likely one which stems from the technique that has come to be most closely associated with person-centered therapy: reflection of feeling. Whether or not this technique helps the client, I believe it most certainly helps the therapist to experience empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. Specifically, it functions in much the same way as do exercises for *method* actors: It forces us to be something we're not (or not fully), to reinvent ourselves in ways that produce growth *in us*, growth that enables us to experience the core conditions. In what follows, then, I will look at how reflecting feelings produces, in the therapist, the core conditions.

A starting point to understanding this is to examine the *method* actor's task and compare it with what we do:

On the stage, the actor is surrounded by fictions: this applies in the settings, costumes, props, to the other actors, and even to himself in make-up.

The actor must be able to regard all this as though it were true, as though he were convinced that all that surrounds him on the stage is a living reality and, along with himself, he must convince the audience as well. (Rapoport, 1974, p 45)

To do this, the *method* actor must adopt the "stage attitude," something that should look quite familiar, a theatrical version of the person-centered attitude. That is, just as the actor must regard whatever fictions are invented by the playwright as true and convey his/her belief to the audience, we must empathically and uncritically understand our client's reality – a reality that may be very different from ours – and believably convey this understanding to him or her. In other words, the stage attitude is the person-centered attitude, embodying a theatrical version of empathy, unconditionality, and congruence. In a crucial way, then, the *method* actor and we are in the same business.

I have consistently italicized *method* because not all acting approaches use the notion of stage attitude. This is an idea central to the writings of Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) who was the originator of the method school.<sup>2</sup> He was a director considered at least revolutionary and at most one of a handful of truly great theatrical directors – a kind of dramatic Carl Rogers. Before method acting, the task of the actor was to project emotions to the audience using techniques learned from something like cookbooks for conveying feelings. For example, Strassberg (1971, p. 12) quotes one such source as instructing: ". . . Love is expressed by a gay, soft and charming voice; hate by a sharp, sullen, and severe one." Stanislavski shifted the focus from the outward appearance of an actor to his/her feelings or attitudes as Rogers shifted therapeutic practice from reliance on expert techniques to the therapist's feelings or attitudes.

Like person-centered therapy, method theater is quite explicit about its actors embodying the core conditions of empathy and congruence without calling them exactly that however.<sup>3</sup> On empathy, for example: "The [Stanislavski] system, by 'turning on' the subconscious mechanisms, helps an actor to live the experiences of a character as if they were his own" (Moore, 1974, p.18).

Or congruence: "If an actor wants to impress the audience Pushkin called it, he must follow the Stanislavski formula, 'Go from yourself . . .'" (Moore, p 72)

"Do not 'portray' anything for the effect that you want it to have on the spectator; do not concoct adjustments but actively fulfill your task because you believe in the given circumstances. You must experience an organic necessity for achieving the aim you have set yourself on the stage. Under such conditions true stage feelings will be engendered: gladness, sorrow, anger, shame, etc., depending on the task and its justification." (Rapoport, 1971, pp 52-53)

Regardless of what the attitudes are called, then, the method actor and the person-centered therapist both need to sustain them to be successful. Unlike the person-centered therapeutic enterprise, however, method acting doesn't demand its practitioners be saints. Instead, directors have evolved exercises to deal with less than perfect people. Most of these are role-preparation activities, building empathy and congruence before the actor goes on stage. There is no master catalogue. Directors borrow from others or make them up as the need arises. For example:

"Do several exercises of this sort, and remember: never anticipate how you will act, nor plan the adjustment beforehand (e.g., *how* you will bang on the table), but always strive to concentrate on *why* you are acting (why you are banging), then, quite independently, the proper adaptation will appear.

"Call on a friend in order to tell him some bad news, or to please him (bring him a present), or to scold him for something. In doing these exercises remember all that we have previously studied, i.e., the attitude to environment, and consequently justification by the creative fantasy. You must know in each case: 1) Who the news is for, and from whom it comes, etc. 2) What the present is and in connection with what (birthday, winning of a lottery prize, etc. ). 3) Why you are angry, why you came to scold him, etc."<sup>4</sup> (Rapoport, p 52)

No matter how well one prepares for a role, it is irrelevant unless s/he can sustain the basic person-centered/stage attitude on stage. "Stanislavski saw that (probably because of the artificial atmosphere of the stage) an actor's senses are often prone to paralysis in front of a mass of people. The actor then loses the feeling of real life and forgets how to do the simplest things that he does naturally and spontaneously in life" (Moore, p. 11). That is, s/he ceases to be herself/himself and instead becomes an actor, a pretender.<sup>5</sup>

The best antidote to stage fright is to act, not in the sense of pretending but of engaging in action: "Physical action is the 'bait' for emotions, a pretext for involving the psychological life, said Stanislavski. *All attention* must be directed to the execution of physical actions, to their logical consecutiveness. Only truthful, concretely executed physical actions stir the 'great truth' of thoughts, emotions, experiences, and a 'small untruth' of physical actions gives birth to a 'great untruth' in the region of emotions, thoughts, and imagination said Stanislavski" (Moore, p. 23). While there are many kinds of actions one might use, one that comes up repeatedly is the word: "The *word*, said Stanislavski, is the physical side of the psychophysical process; images and the meanings behind the words form its psychological side" (Moore, p. 22).<sup>6</sup>

In method acting, then, the analogues of empathy and congruence aren't merely attitudes that inhere in saints. They are qualities cultivated in ordinary actors by planned activities, some of which involve the use of words. Just as for the method actor, then, one could argue that for the person-centered therapist words are "bait"; reflections of feeling enable us to experience a person-centered attitude toward our clients.

How exactly does this "bait" for the emotions work? Probably, the psychologist whose ideas most closely parallel those of Stanislavski's is the earlier William James. Like Stanislavski, "James made the emotion the result, and not the cause, of . . . bodily changes, and it was easy to summarize his view in such phrases as 'we feel sorry because we cry, afraid because we tremble' . . ." (Boring, 1950, p. 516). This notion that action causes feeling has also been incorporated into a Gestalt Therapy where the therapist instructs the client to engage in a physical action so s/he can examine his/her resulting emotions. For example, a timid client may be instructed to roar like a lion. We do; therefore, we feel. Finally, turning from psychology to lexicography, it's interesting to note that of the different definitions of "attitude," one concerns feeling: a second, "the arrangement of the parts of a body" (Woolf, 1974, 60). Thus the definition of "attitude" itself argues the interdependence of doing and feeling.

But the dictionary reminds us that attitude may involve more than feeling and doing. There may be an intellectual component as well. It is "a *mental position*. . . in relation to an object." (Woolf, 1974, p. 60; italics added.) In the present context, the person-centered attitude is a particular orientation toward the act of responding to what the client says. The therapist is oriented toward reflecting his/her feelings. The therapist needs a "mental position," not just feelings. Without it, clients have an awesome capacity to bore. Boredom, in turn, causes erratic and fragmented behavior (see, for example, Butler & Rice, 1963). Without an orientation – an expectancy to pattern the incoming stimuli – only voyeuristic material or that which somehow relates to our condition would hold our interest. In this regard, the therapist is like a military radar operator monitoring a radar screen. His/her job like ours is to ignore what he sees most of the

time, irrelevant "noise," and to attend only to the occasional but significant signal or blip. S/he fights boredom and remains alert because he has a mental picture of what he needs to see. We remain alert because we have a picture of what we need to respond to. If we reflect feelings our "mental position" is to respond to content that the client apparently has feelings about, often feelings hinted at (embedded in "noise") rather than stated clearly.

Theory aside, how does reflecting feeling work concretely for a therapist? As with any experiential device it works differently for each of us. All I can do is suggest how it functions for me and invite you, in a thought experiment, to plug in your own experience and see how it's similar to and divergent from mine. All too often in an hour I find myself either thinking *about* the client (How I'm going to write the summary, what kind of GAF score I'm going to use, how am I going to justify more visits to a P.P.O., etc.) or about myself. I strain to get past this noise by an act of will. Reflecting feelings is my task, or at least the simplest and most doable aspect of it. If I can't do anything else, at least I can do that! I strain to focus my attention on the client although, at that moment, I don't really care about him or her. I listen to the ongoing, seemingly seamless stream of blather; and slowly, almost painfully, I fashion a tentative response to share with the client about his feelings together with the matrix of events in which they seem to inhere. This attempt, of course, changes what I perceive just as focusing my eyes would. I find a seam. Where there was just an undifferentiated forest there are now trees. Moreover, I think I see some white pines that are kind of interesting because everywhere else there are blue spruce. I respond,

In other words, I made myself interested by a psychophysical event, attempting to reflect feelings. Compare this person-centered example to what Rapoport (1974) says of the method actor's learning to attend:

When the attention is actually focused on the object, the pupil will notice that the physical strain, the embarrassment, he experienced when he first stepped on to the stage, has vanished or has considerably diminished.

Take *hearing*. The person performing the exercise begins to listen, standing or sitting before the group . . . he does not make a pretense of listening but listens intently. He does not simply listen to noise in general but *directs his attention toward something specific* [italics added], for instance he listens to what is going on beyond the wall in the street, striving to catch everything down to the tiniest sound. And once he actually becomes really interested and centers his hearing on the given object, the others will see, and he himself will feel, that he has become muscularly (physically) free, and his attention will have become organic.

The person-centered psychotherapist and method actor, then, both use activities to enable each to achieve the core conditions in one case or stage attitude in the other. The difference is that the method actor is light years ahead because s/he self-consciously uses techniques to actualize his/her potential. On the other hand, the person-centered therapist uses reflection of feeling at best only accidentally as a self actualization technique. Instead, s/he intends it to help the client. This is at best. At worst s/he uses it almost guiltily – technique as a substitute for honest emotions.<sup>7</sup> This is too bad, of course, because it's really a way of getting from here to there, from irritable, bored, and self-centered to empathic, congruent, and unconditionally positively regarding.

This brings us back to poor Charley. While he may be – well – a little rancid as a literary device, one feels sorry for him treading water in tuna purgatory. What we have learned is that most good tasting tunas aren't born that way. While they may have that potential, they have to develop. Perhaps learning Swahili or Charley Parker riffs won't do it for him any more than, say, focusing techniques will do it for a therapist. On the other hand, say, eating lily pads and not bottom feeding may help him improve his flavor. In this case, having good taste helps him taste good, just as the deliberate reflection of feeling helps to actualize the therapist's person-centered potential.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, their point was anticipated more than 40 years earlier by E.H. Porter (1950). He wrote about the client-centered therapist's response: "The major criterion of the effectiveness of the language seems to reside more in the sincerity and spontaneity of the language than in its grammatical or rhetorical structure" (p. 83).

<sup>2</sup> Stanislavski apparently preferred the term "system" to "method" but it is called "method" almost universally today so using this term I adhere to contemporary usage.

<sup>3</sup> It does not however, deal with unconditional positive regard in the same manner. On the other hand, as I pointed out, the idea that the actor must realistically convey any fiction the playwright invents is quite similar to the therapist's unconditionally regarding anything the client expresses.

<sup>4</sup> This appears quite analogous to reflecting feeling in person-centered psychotherapy except that instead of attempting to understand what the utterance of a real other means to him/her, one is trying to understand what the meaning of an action would be to a fictional person.

<sup>5</sup> If "stage fright" suggests to you the typical nonperson-centered clinical attitude, your understanding is similar to mine.

<sup>6</sup> Using other than words, Chekhov (1971) provides an amusing example that is similar to the therapist's sitting in an attentive position in order to make himself interested: "In order to eradicate a cliché a real activity should be substituted. A cliché used to indicate deep thought is wrinkling one's forehead and looking at the ceiling. If the actor will stop and actually *think* – even if all he does is the multiplication tables – thought will be manifested in his face and body. (p. 110). . ."

<sup>7</sup>For a more detailed view of the negative effects of reflection of feeling see Carkhuff and Berenson (1967).

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