

How Humanistic Psychology changed my Life

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Living without awareness of our psychology is an extraordinary, yet obviously, very ordinary thing. Looking back at myself before therapy, it really was like I was living in a dream where you don't quite know what is going on, where there are forces at play that have a sinister quality to them and where no matter what you try you are always being defeated, always getting it wrong or feeling bad for some reason. For me this came with an unbearable sense of blame and shame, which resulted in depressive episodes that lasted from weeks to months. Whenever we avoid what is unbearable, as part of our self's survival strategy, there are always consequences, depression and anxiety are just the most common.

It was either this, or I was omnipotent, an arrogant narcissist, long before that word became so fashionable thanks to our friend Donald. I was caught on the "narcissistic see-saw", rarely able to be balanced.

In my early thirties, when the mess I was making of my life reached a crescendo, I could no longer avoid or deny how dysfunctional I was being, and so reluctantly, yet also with some relief, I agreed to go into therapy.

My mother had post-natal depression after my younger sister was born, when I was three. As part of her "treatment" she came under the influence of two psychiatrists who were a couple. They, and especially he, had an ongoing dysfunctional relationship with my mother. They had a powerful ideology based on a sort of synthesis between radical Left-wing and Freudian ideas and their influence on our family last for many years, even after my parents split up when I was seven. The result was that I grew up with a deep instinctive suspicion of "therapists", especially of those with any interpretive and manipulative tendencies.

So, when it came to choosing a therapist for myself, I wanted someone who approached therapy from a different standpoint. I had been interested in the likes of Zen, Krishnamurti, Gurdjieff, Jung since I was seventeen, I was used to meditating and "working on myself", but that "work" had managed to free me from the cycles of depression I was caught in. I did know that sanity was to be found in the here and now, even though I was so often unable to embody it, and this led me to Gestalt therapy. Its emphasis on the "here and now" resonated, and I quickly became an enthusiast.

Gestalt, like other "Humanistic" modalities, has its roots in the 1950's - 60's recognition of the need to bring meaning into psychology. It was more than that, it was about the recognition that there was meaning to our existence and that this needed to underly psychology. That as human beings we are not just the mechanical result of evolution and the forces acting on us. Humanistic Psychology became the "third force", arguing that there is more to life than Behaviorism and Freud's drive theories. We all have this powerfully creative and "self-actualizing" force within us that wants us to grow and develop, towards realising our "human potential".

These days I am brave enough to put it more starkly, it is about accepting that we are both human and God, that we inhabit these two streams of life, the Absolute and the Relative, the One and Many. That this is still far from being generally accepted is still the cause of much confusion. Our current dominant, modern/scientific and post-modern, levels of consciousness (Wilber 2017) still do

not allow the acceptance of the idea of God back into a more general legitimacy. But this is not the “God” of religious belief which was our dominant level of consciousness before the Enlightenment, it is about recognising that a large and profound part of our nature is “God”.

To me this is shown by our ability to become conscious of Consciousness itself, by the fact that as we get past our compensatory ego defenses, we discover that Love exists as a fundamental aspect of our nature, by how when we live with awareness of body and breath we connect to the Energy of the Universe. It is also shown by the extraordinary fact that we have choice. There might be very little to begin with, but as we get to know ourselves better, as we become more conscious this expands, and we are gradually able to take more and more responsibility for ourselves.

Responsibility for developing the quality of our being. We have the possibility, which was often glimpsed by the early humanistic psychologists, of realising the God aspect of ourselves. This awareness can now be expressed without any “New Age” or “Hippy” mysticism, without any going backwards into old belief levels of consciousness. This perspective “includes and transcends” (Wilber) religion, science and post-modernism into a new clarity, something that I trust and think more and more people are finding. Even despite the apparent increase in political madness that currently surrounds us. Growth and development never work in straight lines.

The power of humanistic psychology comes, as I understand it, from this connection with the Absolute. It is this that brings the level of trust and acceptance in the fundamental “Goodness” of human beings and this then opens the door to love and forgiveness. I desperately needed that. I was beating myself up so badly at times that I am grateful for having survived. I am also grateful for my mother’s healthy non-shouldistic loving care for the first three years of my life. Without that life would have been even more hellish, I could instinctively see during my school years that others were worse off than me, their level of disturbance was even deeper than mine.

It is this profound acceptance of “what is” and trust in the healing and repairing processes of the self that sets humanistic psychology apart. Trusting in “God”, in the wisdom of the self, in the power of awareness, in our deep wish for health and freedom, are what frees the therapist from needing to control or manipulate. It provides the ground for transformational self-acceptance. I know that for myself and the vast majority of people I meet, facing insecurity is a very long (and ongoing) process. As I understand it, we need the deepening connection with, and knowledge of, the Absolute to support letting go of our ego with all its compulsive and compensatory structures. One thing I am sure of, is that as we do this, we live with more consciousness, more love, and more embodiment.

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