

The First Principle in Psychotherapy and What it Means for You
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I have come to realize how the same eternal truths endure and manifest in different forms. Our first UU Principle is just such an example. The “Golden Rule” is recognized in various forms in all the major religions and very close in meaning to affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” In psychotherapy the same principle is known as “unconditional positive regard.” These are three different ways to say the same thing.

This spiritual truth, “affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity” of all sounds easy but in practice it is sometimes difficult to do, especially with people that cause us grief. Many of the problems facing our nation could be solved if everyone adhered to our first UU principle. Three problems that come to my mind easily are: how we treat migrants and refugees coming to our borders seeking asylum, how we deal with religious, racial and ethnic minorities, and how our law enforcement personnel approach young people of color in the line of their duty.

My hope is that the ideas in this talk will remind us of tools to help address the national concerns I mentioned. You can think in terms of the adages “think globally, act locally” or “let peace begin with me.” By treating people of color and immigrants with kindness and empathy, and by helping to educate those who don't, we can make a difference.

Let's look at our first principle in context with our seventh. Our first of course focuses upon the individual, while the seventh encompasses the entire web of existence. This suggests to me we UU's seek a balance between these two poles. In psychotherapy which is my main focus today, the goal is to help increase the feeling of worth in the client and to help enhance the client's integration into the wider world.

Psychotherapy, practiced as it is intended, involves a genuine, intimate connection between persons. Without the honoring of the “inherent worth and dignity” of the client no meaningful healing would be possible. Another way to say this is that without the full acceptance by the therapist of the client as she or he is, and without the client becoming increasingly more able to accept herself or himself as a person of worth as that they presently are, meaningful change in therapy is unlikely to occur. Clients in therapy are able to change, paradoxically, when they feel affirmed and accepted as they currently are.

Many clients who seek psychotherapy suffer from a depleted sense of themselves. They feel unworthy, or “less than” others. Therapists beginning with Alfred Adler who coined the term “inferiority complex,” to the “neo-Freudians,” to Carl Rogers, and the “Object Relations” psychoanalysts have noted that low self

worth was a common feature of clients in therapy. Virtually all therapists have sought in various ways to improve self-worth. Low self-worth is a component of depression, anxiety disorders, PTSD, schizophrenia and the personality disorders. Part of the work in psychotherapy is to help clients to appreciate their “Inherent worth and dignity.” When we feel greater self-worth it makes it easier to love and be loved by others. Psychologist Leon Seltzer said:

If, warts and all, you come to fully embrace yourself, your relationships would definitely become more *intimate*. For then you'd no longer feel compelled to hide your supposedly "unacceptable" qualities. You'd be more able to open yourself up to others, and you'd probably *want* to do so. Plus, such a heightened willingness to self-disclose can be infectious, prompting others to respond in kind and so deepen feelings of love and attachment between both of you.

Acceptance and love of oneself makes it easier to form deep and meaningful relationships.

For me the psychologist who most thoroughly embodied the idea that all human beings have inherent worth and dignity was Carl Rogers. Rogers was arguably one of the six most influential figures in the field of psychotherapy in the last century. Rogers is recognized along with Abraham Maslow as pioneers of “Humanistic” and “Positive Psychology.” Even if you have not heard of Carl Rogers you likely have heard of his ideas and probably used them yourself. Terms like “empathic listening” or “active listening,” “mirroring,” “client-centered” or “person-centered” or “child-centered” all originate with Rogers. Marshall Rosenberg’s “nonviolent conflict resolution” and David Cooperrider’s “Appreciative Inquiry” approaches have their roots in Rogers’ ideas. Thomas Gordon’s “Between Parent and Child,” and Eugene Gendlin’s “Focusing” also show the influence of Rogers’ theories and practices as they were among his prominent students. The influential psychoanalyst and pioneer in the treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Heinz Kohut as well, was heavily influenced by Rogers. Kohut borrowed Rogers’ ideas about empathy, mirroring, and creating a warm relationship to promote healing in psychotherapy.

Central to all of his work is the belief Rogers had that each person has the innate capacity to be actualized, meaning to reach their full potential, as well to work collaboratively, and contribute to the world. The goal of psychotherapy in this frame of reference is to help remove the blocks to self-worth. In other words, psychotherapy is based upon adherence to our UU’s first principle, particularly as it applies to oneself, but also as it applies to others.

Carl Rogers was born in 1902 and he died in 1987. He was raised in a Christian home, his mother being a Congregationalist and his father a Baptist. Carl attended Union Theological Seminary with the intension of becoming a minister. After a period of questioning his faith and became an atheist. He left the seminary and enrolled in a graduate program in psychology. In spite of this radical change in theology, he retained the conviction basic to all the world’s

religions, that each individual is sacred and worthy of compassion and respect. I do not know this for certain, but I suspect that Rogers approach to psychotherapy was for him a spiritual endeavor and a replacement for the religion he had to abandon. Carl had the extraordinary gift of being a critically thinking scientist as well as an insightful, warm and engaging therapist.

When the other person is hurting, confused, troubled, anxious, alienated, terrified; or when he or she is doubtful of self-worth, uncertain as to identity, then understanding is called for. The gentle and sensitive companionship of an empathic stance... provides illumination and healing. In such situations deep understanding is, I believe, the most precious gift one can give to another.

The enduring contributions that Rogers made to the field of psychotherapy are ones that are useful in effective human communication generally. I hold up four of these with you today in the hope that you will find them useful in your communication. All four are connected to the principle of inherent worth and dignity.

The first one is about genuineness and equality. Rogers proved that the relationship between the client and the therapist was the most important ingredient of successful therapy. Under the influence of Freud, the early psychoanalysts regarded the relationship between the client and the analyst as artificial and contaminated by the client's "transference." The term transference means the projection of the client's problematic relationships from childhood onto the therapist. The orthodox psychoanalyst sat in a chair behind the client who would lie on a couch. This arrangement was intended to limit the "real relationship" and foster the "transference." The psychoanalyst was to be "a blank screen" so that the client could project the transference. Rogers was among those who challenged this kind of positioning in the consulting room. Instead he promoted the arrangement that client and therapist were both to sit upright and face-to-face, collaborating as equal partners in the effort to help the client. Traditionally trained psychoanalysts were taught not to share anything of a personal nature. This also contributed to inequality between client and therapist. Rogers instead promoted the idea that the therapist should judiciously disclose aspects that are relevant to the client's life, in an effort to be genuine, to model sharing, as well as to provide encouragement. Research has borne out that genuineness and warmth are among therapist characteristics associated with a positive outcome in psychotherapy. I think you can see that these same characteristics of genuineness and warmth convey to clients that they are regarded as inherently worthy and deserving of dignity. To be genuine according to Rogers means to have your feelings and behavior match what you say. This is sometimes referred to as "congruency." It is the opposite of a false façade. Instead it is to have integrity. The therapist in this way serves as a role model for the client who is fearful of revealing their true self. What therapists practice in their consulting rooms we can all practice in our daily interactions. We can all seek to be genuine and to treat all others as equals.

A second characteristic that Rogers promoted and that research has supported is what he termed “unconditional positive regard.” This was the practice that no matter how awful or shameful the deed, thought, or the feeling the client discloses, the therapist completely accepts the client as a person of worth. Some deeds might be disparaged but never the person. This to me is the full embodiment of our first UU principle. Would you agree? Unconditional positive regard promotes a trusting environment, which allows the client to become more and more able to disclose parts of life associated with shame or guilt. And thus it becomes possible to heal from these harmful influences. I have been witness to this kind of healing on many occasions. I recently had a client share that he was ashamed of having a mental illness and he felt like a “monster.” Just being able to disclose that seemed to bring some ease to many clients as it did for the client I just referred to. Simply to be told you have inherent worth and dignity is healing. Perhaps some of you can think of experiences in your own lives in which you helped a friend or family member in a similar way. Or maybe you were on the receiving end? When we treat others with unconditional positive regard we are avoiding making judgments and we are honoring their inherent worth and dignity.

A third important contribution to the field of psychotherapy by Rogers was “empathy.” While Rogers did not invent the term he did more to identify it as a source of psychotherapeutic healing than any of his predecessors. With empathy the therapist experiences a felt compassion and understanding of the client's internal frame of reference. Accurate empathy on the part of the therapist helps the client believe in the therapist's unconditional regard for them. The client sees and feels that the therapist understands but does not judge.

Empathy is still a relatively rare experience in daily communication in spite of its power to heal. We see this most often in the conflict between the races. We could go a long way towards solving racial and ethnic conflict. “White fragility” is an example of the failure of empathy. White people need to hear from people of color about their resentment for our failure to understand the many micro-aggressions and micro-discriminations they have endured.

To be able to experience empathy for another the listener has to completely focus upon what the speaker is saying as well as to attend to the non-verbal communication. The listener has to put themselves in the shoes of the speaker and to imagine what it is like to be the speaker at that moment. Once the listener has a sense of the experience of the speaker one then tentatively “reflects” this back to the speaker and asks if that is correct. Rogers called it “mirroring.” This is the fourth communication tool he promoted that I wanted to share. It shows that the listener affirms the “inherent worth and dignity” of the speaker. The listener becomes a mirror for the speaker. That “meta” level of communication, that nonverbal message, cannot help but enhance the sense of self of the speaker. When we listen in this deep way we are expressing without saying, “you matter to me.” To the extent that each of us does this in our daily lives we bring the other closer to us and we deepen relationships.

Affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person inspire the best in others and us. It creates the foundation for our other six UU principles to flourish. We would not have, “justice, equity, and compassion,” it would be harder to do “a free and responsible search,” or to promote the goal of world peace and justice for all,” and so on.

If you are a believer in the value of our first principle, one way you might practice it every day is to spend some time really listening with empathy to someone you happen to be with. And if appropriate, you can “mirror” back your understanding. Like all our seven principles it can be a spiritual practice. Some of you may know of the I-Thou principle of the philosopher and theologian Martin Buber. Basically he proposed that we have two alternate ways of being in the world. In the “I-Thou” mode we experience the other as unique and in the immediacy of the present moment. That form of experience Buber contrasted with the “I-It” type where we experience the other in a categorized and stereotypical way. The I-Thou mode is the spiritual one.

Genuineness and equality, unconditional positive regard, empathy and mirroring; these are the tools that Rogers found to be effective in promoting healing in psychotherapy. These same tools can be used by all of us to embody our first principle. Together they become a spiritual practice. May we all continue to benefit from the legacy of Carl Rogers.