

The Significance of the Person-Centered Approach in Education as seen through the Eyes of Three High School Students and their PCA Counselor/Facilitator

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Introduction

What you will be reading in the following pages are the words of students sharing their feelings and stories related to the impact that Carl Rogers and the person-centered approach had on their lives. Although they will share how I as their counselor impacted them, I want the reader to fully appreciate that it is an influence of: my graduate school instructors, who introduced me to the books, *On Becoming a Person* and *Freedom to Learn*; my school principal, George Simpson that trusted me and allowed me the freedom to take, what was then called the client-centered approach, with our students; The LaJolla Program at Center for the Studies of the Person; and lastly, but primarily, the influence of Carl Rogers* and what I learned as the client-centered approach and what is now known as the person-centered approach. In his books, I felt like Rogers was writing to me personally, giving me the courage to be myself, encouraging me to listen to my students and to love them just as they are.

As you read, students are sharing from their heart about their experiences with me. Please keep in mind that they are actually talking about their experience with the counselor who had taken to heart the person-centered approach and who attempted to live out Rogers' theory (see below), as I was just beginning to understand the theory and approach.

"Roger's theory very briefly stated is this, according to Howard Kirshenbaum in his video: Carl Rogers' Three Core Conditions

Attitudes of the Listener	Result in the Relationship Experienced by Client
When the listener can be . . .	The client experiences:
Accepting	Unconditional Positive Regard
When the listener can be . . .	The client experiences:
Understanding	Empathy
When the listener can be . . .	The client experiences:
Genuine	Congruence

Although he always remained primarily non-directive in his practice, Rogers soon recognized that the counselor's *attitudes* toward the client were as important as his particular techniques. The techniques or methods were the way to implement the facilitative attitudes of accepting and understanding. Moreover, if these attitudes of the counselor were not genuine, then all the reflecting of feelings in the world would not be of much help to the client. Still later, Rogers clarified that it was the therapeutic relationship, which the attitudes helped create, that was most growth producing. And he continued to refine the three key conditions in the client centered relationship that brought about positive change in clients:

First is to accept the client as she is, as a person of inherent worth, possessing both positive and negative feelings and impulses. Rogers adopted a term from Standal and called this accepting and

prizing of the person, Unconditional Positive Regard. Second is empathy, "The therapist's willingness and sensitive ability to understand the client's thoughts, feelings and struggles from the client's point of view, to adopt his frame of reference". Third is congruence, to be genuine, real, authentic or congruent in the relationship.

Rogers wrote, "It is only as the therapist is in that relationship a unified person, with his experienced feeling, his awareness of his feelings and his expression of those feelings, all congruent or similar, that he is most able to facilitate therapy. When a counselor communicates this unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding and congruence, so that the client perceives them, at least to a minimal degree, then what Rogers called the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change are present.

Rogers argued and demonstrated that the client has within himself the ability and tendency to understand his needs and problems, to gain insight, to reorganize his personality and to take constructive action. What clients need says Rogers, is not the judgement, interpretation, advice or direction of experts, but supportive counselors and therapists, to help them rediscover and trust their inner experiencing, a concept borrowed from Gendlin, achieve their own insights, and set their own direction."

Howard Kirschenbaum, Video (2003), "Carl Rogers and the Person-Centered Approach"

Rogers had also stated: "the individual has within him or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes, and self-directive behavior and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided".

"These conditions constitute the "growth promoting climate, whether we are speaking of the relationship between therapist and client, parent and child, leader and group, teacher and student, or administrator and staff."

Carl R. Rogers (1986)

In the process of trying to live the person-centered approach, I was learning as much from my students as I was learning from my professors and my readings. The students who attended the first groups I established were in middle school. They were 13 and 14 years old. A few years later, I had the opportunity to create person-centered groups with high school students who were 14 to 18 years old. I conducted ten groups a week, through the whole school year! We met for about 50 minutes each meeting until the bell would ring for them to go to their next class. Many of the students then met with me individually as well. I experimented with the size of the groups and the make-up of the groups (all girls and all boys, concentric circles etc.). I would ask at the end of year what they had learned and listened and modified the following year. As I have said, I probably learned as much or more from my experiences with my students in these first few years as I did from the people and programs I named above, although without the support of those people and their courses, I would not have had enough courage to follow through so consistently when I faced opposition at times from some parents, teachers, and administration.

I want to share three key examples of PCA experiences and work that I have participated in while working in public schools for over 50 years. With the permission of these three students, I will share with you the personal and intimate reflections they shared with me. Interestingly, one student, Kathy, is from my first year (1968) as a counselor and Sarah is from forty-two years

later, from my last year in a school as a counselor in 2010. Shirley was a student I met in the early 1970's. I think their reflections, although focusing on me, are more of a demonstration of "a way of being" that is person-centered.

A Little about Me: Becoming a Person-Centered Counselor or Facilitator

In 1966, I had become a teacher in an elementary school. While teaching I started my graduate program in counseling and was introduced to the writings of Carl Rogers. I also was exploring Humanistic Education at the University of Massachusetts because I had shared with my professor that if I had been introduced to Rogers earlier, I think I would have been a much better teacher. I was still loving teaching and I was beginning to love being a counselor.

In my fifth grade class, I started to apply the person-centered approach with my classroom students. Rogers' book, *Freedom to Learn* excited me so much that I could not wait to get to school each morning to explore this approach. Looking back, I realize how lucky I was to have my professors at my college and my principal at my school provide me with such freedom and wise feedback while I groped to listen, learn and try out being more open with my students. Before even graduating with my masters degree in counseling, my principal advocated for me at the state level to give him permission to hire me as the school counselor.

I was reading everything I could get my hands on: Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, Sidney Jourard, *The Transparent Self*. I was reading Rollo May, Abraham Maslow as well as other authors who wrote about humanistic psychology. The list goes on. I devoured the books. I had found my life's calling. It all felt so familiar, like in another life I had already done this before. It felt natural for me to listen and put myself in the place of another. During the summer, just before I was to start my first job as a school counselor, I met one of my students from my sixth grade class on the beach while I was on vacation. (I can still remember Denise and the talk we had and even location of the beach where we sat and talked) I had just completed a number of counseling courses at the time. As she started to talk with me about her summer, I listened and found ways of letting her know that I understood. Well, it just amazed me that she opened up more and then opened up more. Before I knew it an hour had gone by! Wow! Be with a person in their space and just listen and they share pretty important parts of themselves! I felt a joy and privilege to spend the time with her. I think we both walked off the beach energized! I was ready to begin as counselor in the elementary school, room 108!

It was just a few weeks later that I met Kathy. How could I ever believe that more than 60 years later, I would be inviting one of my first counselees, Kathy, to go back and visit that room again! And that she would even devote a chapter in her book to our experiences there!

Student One: Getting to Know Kathy

It was about this time, in my first or second year of being a counselor that I met Kathy. When I met Kathy, I had only had a few counseling courses. I trusted my faculty advisors and they gave me confidence that I had a way of being that was helpful to others. I met Kathy with the

innocent feelings and excitement of being a new counselor who might be of significant help to my students. As you will see in her sharing from her book, *The Other Side of the Wall: Unbreakable* (2021) I met a person who much to my dismay, was not talking openly and so I sometimes was baffled as to what was happening to her and why she hated herself so much. I heard her sharing with me again and again that she was not a good person. Each week she met with me she talked a little and cried a lot. She did laugh sometimes as she pulled out Kleenex after Kleenex from the box in my guidance office in the K-8 elementary school. I think the Kleenex help her more than I did. I did not know what to do to help Kathy out of this horrible pain.

I knew that I cared and I knew that it seemed to help her a little to come and try to talk with me. Mostly I listened as best I could at the time. Sometimes I did give her feedback about how I experienced her. I assured her that she was important to me and that I cared about her and how I wished I could make the pain go away. I tried to *be with* her, to be person-centered. I had to remind myself that she was continuing to come down to my office on her own, without any prompting from me. That thought reassured me that it must be helping her in some way.

Briefly, because of her sexual abuse, Kathy's personality later disintegrated into multiple personalities. She was admitted into psychiatric hospital and yet despite all her future challenges she never gave up hope.

Recently Kathy published a book about her trauma as a young girl. Below I will share some parts of the Chapter, "Full Circle" from Kathy's book, *The Other Side of the Wall: Unbreakable*(2021). In this heart wrenching book, Kathy describes in detail what she went through before, during and after the time she spent with me during her seventh grade year.

Kathy shares her experience of meeting me as a 12 year old girl

Now I would like to go back to that time 45 years ago, and let you hear the experience of Kathy as a 12 year old, coming in to my office for the first time. She describes her experience of me in my first year as a novice, trying to be a person-centered counselor. She writes:

Anyway my mom talked to my doctor about me and my nightmares. He said something about me needing more attention, but I think that's really dumb. my parents always pay to attention to me . . .

My doctor got this genius idea, that I should go to see a guidance counselor. What can a counselor do for me when don't even know what happens in the stupid dream. It makes me nervous just thinking about going to our guidance counselor. He will probably think I am crazy, and what if I am?

So my mother must have called the school to make arrangements for me to talk to Mr. Howley. He is new at our school but some kids say he is nice. My friend, Patti who I have

been friends with since first grade, goes to some group he has for kids in 7th and 8th grade. She thinks he's ok, and she would tell me if he was creepy.

I'm still not thrilled with my doctor's idea, but here I have this green corridor pass, that gives me permission to go to Mr. Howley's office during the study hall today. . .

I tap on the door and Mr. Howley stands up and motions with his hand to come in. With a smile on his face he says, "Hi Kathy please come in and have a seat." Oh my everybody calls me Kathy and I never them I am Marie. What chair do you want to sit on? I choose the one facing to the door to get out quick when it is time to leave.

Whoa, what is this room? Who is this man? Why am I here? There are a couple of chairs and a desk and few boxes of Kleenex . . .

. . . he came to sit a little closer to me. I am thinking "ok close enough" he stops and sits on the chair right that spot. What? Can he hear my thoughts?

I don't remember all the details of those visits to Mr. Howley's office. What I do know for sure is that room 108 became this safe fortress for me to run to. I was allowed to sit in the confines strong stone walls, in the hidden corner of my school . . .

Telling or not telling, I still had Mr. Howley making space for me to sit and have my feelings, cry my tears, wreck his room with piles of ripped Kleenex. I spent many safe sessions in that room, just inches from blurting my secret out to this patient man, and I am so grateful for that. I can't imagine holding all those young tears in until the day I did finally explode with my truth, almost three decades later. I know my time with Mr. Howley was very important to me, because beyond my visits to room 108, I remember little else from those years . . .

I was so busy try to forget about the trauma that I deleted so much of the goodness that went on at the same time. Clearly, Mr. Howley was a part of that goodness.

Life is full of mysteries. It is difficult if not impossible sometimes to know whether your approach has reached someone or made a difference. It is important for me to share our reconnection and interactions we have had in the more recent past, 45 years later. Despite not seeing her since she was 14 years old, we met again and our work together has continued in a new person centered way!

45 Years later Kathy and I meet again!

Kathy writes:

Ever wonder how things happen in your life? Is God or the universe interceding to bring a piece of wonderful, a challenge, or dark moment in your life without notice. I have

totally wondered after more than a few decades, how I end up sitting in a coffee shop about to have lunch with two very important people from my childhood. . .

. . . Patti, I had known since I was in grade school. We were supposed to be fast friends forever, but we ended up at two different high schools . . .”

Patti had come back into Kathy’s life many years later when Kathy had become friends with Patti’s sister. Serendipitously, they discovered that they lived within walking distance and they renewed their friendship! Patti, who was in the same class as Kathy, was also a student of mine and had attended person-centered counseling groups in elementary school with me in the late 60’s and then again in the ‘90s!

As the renewed friendship grew between Kathy and Patti, they became “fast friends”. One day, Patti brought up with Kathy, that she had “found” me on the internet and had started to attend a group with me. Kathy shares the story:

Patti asked me if I would like to come to a meditation group she was a part of. And you never guess who ran this group: Yep, Mr. Howley. . .

She had described this group by saying part of the group is silent meditation, but that it almost seemed a little like group therapy as well.

So there I was nervously sitting at a little table in a Panera bread coffee shop about to meet Mr. Howley again. My insides were clashing so much I felt like I had two pounding hearts in my chest. . .

Would it be a lot of small talk, or would I dare to tell him pieces of what I was trying not to say so many years ago, back in that room with the impenetrable cinder block walls. And how do you start that conversation? Would I tell him I have Dissociative Identity Disorder? Would he believe any of this? If I told him my story would he not want me in this group . . .

There was, however not much time to dwell on all this, because there he was right in front of me. The same kind gentle face just as I remembered.

. . . At that moment I trusted that I could sit safely next to this kind man I had known so long ago.

. . . What I do know for sure, is that I did start to tell him the reason I wept and ripped Kleenex in his office all those years before . . .

As I started to speak my truth, a light switched on inside. I realized the tissue confetti in room 108 was my very best effort of releasing my buried feelings. Each piece of the confetti storm was every word I longed to tell. At age 12 my words had only made it from heart to my hands, and not to my fear filled voice . . .

Many people don't believe that DID exists. But if I was going to be involved in the group where feelings are shared, I wanted to be real. Real for me means that there are many parts of me . . .

Kathy took the risk to join the group and to be herself. She found herself not only listened to by me, but also by a group committed to their own growth as well as and supporting others' growth. Kathy development continued:

Wednesdays

After the reunion with Pat, my Wednesdays were no longer just hump day. In my life, Wednesdays became meditation day. Every week our group gathered at Pat's home from 6-7:30pm.

. . . But after the first few weeks I knew I was all in. No matter how tired I was at the end of the day, I hustled to get out of work in time to make to Pat's by six.

Most Wednesdays however, not only did I look forward to the group but also loved driving to group with Patti.

. . . I am writing this after six years of Wednesdays and remain in awe of the transition my soul makes as I walk through the doors of Pat's house. No matter how many people gather on any Wednesday, when I enter the yellow living room I felt myself exhale from the day. The little girl part of me thinks this room had some magic powers. How can simply walking through a door to enter this sacred space make such an internal transformation? . . .

Through the person-centered approach, Kathy deepened her awareness of those parts of herself and her emotions that she could identify and name. Hearing others describe for themselves their own parts and their challenges with parts of themselves, she came to accept and embrace all of the parts and dimensions of her own experiences.

As I think back to the early days of meditation Wednesdays, the little girl part of me did not always think that the yellow room has magic powers. She and I had to do a lot of listening, watching, and finally testing of waters, before anything resembling trust allowed white magic to fill that space. While we did the sharing part of our ninety minutes, strangely enough, there was a lot of talk about everybody in the circle having different parts inside of them. They may have had an angry part of them or a sad part of them, etc. Each taking some time to name a part of them with a feeling word and then expressed that emotion in the present. This idea made me feel two things. One, was maybe I am not so different after all and the other was some angry part saying, "I'll tell you about parts!" What I struggled to learn was that everyone in the room had different parts that together made up who they are. Those parts arose from different experience as did mine. I also learned that my parts just had separate lives, names, and OK maybe outfits, but they too, made up who I am. Finally, I thought I don't have to be in a room of Multiples to feel like part of the group. Without question, I accepted all the parts of this safe circle of people I now consider dear friends. That felt easy. In fact I felt my young

ones inside really identified with the different parts of them. Something changed inside of me. What I found after opening myself to this group of people with all those parts, is that no one passed judgement on anyone. This group was like no other. By example, they actually taught my group inside not to judge one another. We all seemed to be hardest on ourselves. With that, I felt acceptance and not so different after all.

Magic . . .

The sharing part of our time together seemed to clear out the cobwebs and empty the noise in our heads. This is when I really began the journey to meditate.

The group itself had embraced the person-centered approach. Together we supported and embraced one another as we grew individually and collectively.

Encounter with self: Percept Orientation

After Patti brought Kathy and I together to explore coming to the group in my house, Kathy has continued attending my group meetings for the past ten years or so. The group that Kathy has joined embraced the person-centered approach. Together, we supported one another as we grew individually and collectively. The meditation group she referred to had started to evolve into an encounter group and then into what I call, “Encounter with self”. The foundation for our meetings includes an integration of concepts, theories, and philosophy of many people that I have studied or studied with over the last forty years.

Primarily, “Encounter with self” is an integration of the philosophy of Carl Rogers and the unique work of his friend and colleague, John Weir and his wife Joyce. They developed a process of self-differentiation and in their workshops, they introduced me to “percept orientation”. When I orient myself to look at the percepts I create in my mind, I develop more self-awareness. When I can speak more directly using a percept language, I gain deep insight into how I, to use John’s phrase, “how I see me and how I ‘do me.’” John Weir talked in his personal growth workshops about self-differentiation, percept orientation and percept language. Percept language is a language to help us differentiate parts of our self to claim ownership of all of the parts of ourselves instead of projecting the parts onto others.

I have integrated Weir’s work into my continuing person centered encounter group work over the years. This approach has enabled many participants to increase self knowledge and self awareness, enabling transformation, healing, and growth to evolve.

Kathy is a living example of this work in action. Recently after one of our group sessions in “Encounter with self,” Kathy sent me an email as she reflected on her book:

Good morning 🦋

I started to reread the chapter “Full Circle” in my book yesterday. The reason I read it again is because my friend Maya from Slovenia (also a survivor) has finally navigated herself to this chapter. I wanted to read it with her from across the globe. I love this chapter for many reasons. I feel God had something to do with this life circle. ❤️

Anyway, I wanted to share these couple paragraphs with you both as a reminder of the miracles of the sacred safe place. I really enjoyed reading it again... reading how we can create this in our lives even when it is challenging. (However, I feel you both made it easy by providing such a welcoming environment, in structure and your welcome presence)

As I read my words again I could feel myself enter your home and exhaling. Never did I think our Zoom meetings could even resemble those in-person meetings. I learned, we could...

And one more thing. Our sacred space was where I learned I was not so crazy... we all have so many parts of us.

Much love,

Kathy (all of us*)

*This is in reference to Kathy's multiple personalities

In my reply to her email, I shared that I had been thinking of the power of the person-centered approach that I had just learned when I first met her as an eighth grader. I kept reminding myself to trust her and trust the process of her needing to be with me and cry and tear up Kleenex and not talk about why. She kept coming. The one certainty for me was that I cared and wanted to listen and "be with" her in her pain. I have vivid memories of being at my stove on Lexington Street in Bristol and crying because I could feel her pain as she shared her self hatred. All I could feel was love for this poor little girl in so much pain.

Through our consistent person-centered approach together, our sacred space, Kathy deepened her self-awareness of all of the parts of herself and came to embrace each part as she gained a deeper awareness. Kathy knew, and I knew, that I cared, and I wanted to listen and "be with" you in your pain". She reflected:

And looking way back, that is exactly what my little girl needed. I just needed to lay down my deep feelings, I had no idea what to do with. I don't think I really had words. And if I did, I was still in the midst of the trauma and it just didn't feel safe, plain and simple. I did feel your care and listening. And knew you were not afraid to be with me and my pain/fear/self hatred.

You were very person-centered. You let me be me. The only me I could be at that time. And I was able to at least release a fraction of our pain. I felt safe and supported in your presence. And I did not feel like anything else was expected of me in your space. So, I chose to return then. 1967-68, I believe. We were not afraid of you.

We both agreed that we had created a sacred space together. Kathy was able to “see” herself and “be” herself. She was able to accept all of the parts of her through her work in self differentiation. “Being with” all of the parts of herself, accepting and embracing that they are just parts, Kathy has continued to grow and heal.

Stages of Opening my Eyes as a Person-Centered Counselor: Pursuing my own journey of personal growth

It was, I guess, inevitable that I would enter the field of counseling. My parents experienced a great deal of loss and pain while I was growing up. I could feel that pain but did not know that I was sad and wanted to help my family feel better. They did not talk much to me or to one another and so I realized later I had to tune into their feelings to try and understand and console them. These realizations did not come quickly or easily. With the astute and sensitive nature of the professors in my counseling program, issues of my childhood came to the surface and I slowly over many years gained insight. Major transformations took place in me during my thirties and early forties as I faced within myself, guilt, fear, anger, loneliness, and grief. I can share more about my professional experiences and personal growth work at National Training Laboratory, Esalen and at the Center for Studies of the Person, but instead I want to just emphasize one most significant personal growth experiences I participated in during my middle years.

While attending course on Group Theory at NTL in Bethel Maine my curiosity really got piqued while having lunch and seeing participants in another workshop all wearing very personal nametags! When I saw a number of participants with peculiar names; RISK, TWILIGHT, UNCOVERED, EXPLORER, to name a few. I asked one of them about what they were doing and they sent me over to “ANYONE”(his name tag). He told me that his real name was John Weir and he and his wife Joyce run workshops called, “Self-differentiation” also affectionately called the “Weirlab”. It was a laboratory in human relationships and personal growth. At the workshop, I learned we would dance, sing, take notes on our dreams, and report them out to the group. We would do bioenergetics, stand in cold water, and participate in activity after activity to help us become more aware. Lectures were given almost every day of the ten to eleven day lab. He gave me the brochure describing the “lab.” Over the next few years, I attended the intensive Weirlab five times! Self-differentiation, intrapersonal group growth and percept orientation is now my primary work. I didn’t know it at the time, but John Weir was a close friend and colleague of Carl Rogers. What made the Self-differentiation workshop so powerful was being provided opportunities within a framework to observe myself and have a language for describing what I was observing as we did dreamwork, bioenergetics, body work, all within a multitude of psychological theory.

In my work now, I have endeavored to use an integral approach including primarily Rogers and Weir but also including, Gendlin (Focusing), Junpo Denis Kelly Roshi (Mondo Zen) Dan Brown (Mahamudra Meditation), Ramana Maharshi and Ken Wilber (Integral Theory).

These personal and professional growth experiences have helped me tremendously throughout my career. Rogers has always encouraged personal growth and it is particularly emphasized for me now at my age in Rogers' book, *A Way of Being*, Chapter 4, "Growing Old or Older and Growing."

Student Two: Getting to know Shirley

Over the years many students have written to me and shared more about their personal journey. It is gratifying and rewarding. It is only now that I wish I had done more research on the power of adolescents learning self-knowledge and self-awareness while attending encounter groups in schools. I learned so much of what they have shared with me over the years. It was during the middle of my career that out of nowhere, perhaps ten years later, I heard from a student that I had met with frequently when she was an adolescent.

As a seventh grade student, Shirley had attended one of my encounter groups and like many others wanted to set up an individual meeting with me. Shirley was a very bright, articulate, extraverted and funny young woman. She came across to me as confident, capable and fun loving. When she came into my room alone however, she seemed sad and scared. In her individual meetings with me I can still remember vividly the stories she began to tell me of her troubles at home, how she had trouble sleeping and how confused she was as to what was happening to her, as her mother experienced deep anxiety and depression.

Shirley needed a place and a person to confide in. Shirley mentions below that "these brief moments may have been forgotten (by me) long ago". But they were not forgotten! I can still recall some of the very scary incidents that she experienced. What happens in a person-centered approach is a letting in of the other person—the indwelling that I talk about later in this paper. The point I am making is that Shirley was deeply affected by our relationship. So was I!

I clearly remember the day I went out to the mailbox and saw that Shirley, after many years of not hearing from her, had written to me!

Shirley begins her letter:

How is this for a voice from the distant past?!

I was reminiscing with a friend the other night and we began discussing influential people in our youth. After the dutiful homage paid to siblings and parents, I found myself describing you, both your qualities and your influence (albeit unknown to you) on where I am today. As I describe our talks of ten years ago. I realized that, even after all this time, I never felt that things were really resolved between us. That is I have always wanted to let you know what a profound effect you had on me, and now that I have finally attained some stature and ease in the adult world, I would like to share some thoughts with you.

I can barely remember the 12 year old girl who used to come to you for “guidance” once or twice a week, although I do have some vivid memories of you. Specifically, I recall you helping me deal with my anxieties over grades and some of my feelings toward my family (although that situation was so overwhelming at the time that I repressed most of my confusion), telling me once that I had so touched a chord in you that you were tearful trying to convince me (and doing a good job) that everyday I did not choose to end my life was a conscious choice to live, detailing how intelligent you thought I was, giving me a bit of yourself to hold on to during some troubled years. With your busy schedule and other students’ demands, these brief moments may have been forgotten long ago. However for me, they are incredibly salient -as if no time at all had passed. You opened me up to a rare part of myself, a warm feeling, emotion laden girl/woman that I treasure. Of course as with most good things, this enhanced sensitivity carries it’s own curses. As you probably know, the line between mirth and sorrow can be almost invisible, and trite as it sounds, feeling can be a painful thing. Nevertheless, I would not have traded my interactions with you for solid security.

The depth of her self-awareness, and her growth over time, as well as her capacity to see the through-line from her high school experience to her growth as an adult reflects the power of being listened to, seen, heard, and accepted. In a wonderful surprise, and a great gift to me and to the future, the power of listening can also be passed on to others and to the professions that support personal growth. I smiled as I learned about the turns her life had taken:

As for myself, I am 23 now. I graduated last Spring from College in California and I am now pursuing (get this) a Ph.D in clinical psychology from the University of Illinois. You were more of a role model than you know. Basically, I am happy with my life (at least on my good days). I am doing research on sex role stereotyping. I have bloomed into a die hard feminist and on the re-adjustment of ex-mental hospital patients their communities. I have not started seeing clients yet, but the prospect intrigues/excites/terrifies me. Some days I am certain that I will be an excellent counselor – that I will be able to convey the same kind of loving care and support that you conveyed to me. Other days, the issues become murky and I concentrate on just getting through. We all have our moments. I wanted you to know, however, that you had a tremendous impact on my life. You helped sensitize me to the that part of myself which I can feel the most elation, and I only hope that I can do that for my clients.

Shirley taught me many things. It is foolish to underestimate the power of being present to someone, no matter their age, experience, needs, actions. The list goes on. Simply being authentic, can open the possibilities of the authentic self to emerge in the other. As someone deeply listens, each of us is given a space that can quiet the loud voices of doubt and despair and hear the inner voice of what calls us to be our most authentic selves.

Student Three: My Experience and Perspective as I started to get to know Sarah

I had gone on a long journey of career changes and personal growth adventures. As I neared what I thought was the end of my career, I had decided I wanted to work with adolescents again and applied as a counselor at a high school in a small town near my home. When I met Sarah and as I was almost ready to retire, I now had a vantage point of working for decades as a consultant all over the United States in schools, as well as having my own private practice in counseling. Challenged by leading an independent person-centered career, I was now confronted by a new challenge of being in a more restricted public school setting. I kept asking myself, “Could I bring my knowledge to fruition back into the setting I had left 45 years ago?” Doubts rose up within me.

As I entered this new school system, despite all my experience, I was finding myself quite powerless in helping the school I was working in as well as helping the students to live out their potentials. Instead of my being able to do two encounter groups each day—as I did back 40 years ago—with the new demands in school counseling, I could only manage the time to do two groups for the week! The school system seemed to want me to be more of a paper clerk and academic manager for the students, and I wanted to be a counselor! The students saw me as someone they would talk to about signing up for classes and for making choices about college. I wanted to be a counselor and get to know them personally!

In the past, I never really saw myself as a therapist or counselor or group leader. Yet I could see myself as a facilitator. With that image in mind, I would just be myself in a group. Others would give me the impression that I helped them with what I said or the way I listened to them. I never quite understood what I did, and no name would fit in my mind the way I saw myself. Others might call it therapy or counseling. I was never comfortable with those roles. I came to realize that I am a “Personal Growth Facilitator.” This seems to be the closest title I can find to define the work I do in whether in businesses, schools, with my clients or in this case with my students. In order to make it easier on myself and others, I still mostly use the word counseling. But in this school counseling was not the word used either. It was guidance.

At the high school where I met Sara, I thought that with all my experience and growth I could do a lot of person-centered counseling again with high school students. I pictured myself doing a lot of groups and a lot of personal counseling. How naïve I was! It took maybe two solid years before I found a point of entry for creating the relationships with adolescents that I knew they needed. And it took about the same amount of time for me to establish groups that had no other purpose except to meet and listen to one another. It was difficult to explain to other colleagues and the students themselves, the importance of adolescents learning to listen to themselves, listen to others, to try to solve problems together, to share with other students their real needs and feelings. By the time I met Sarah, I had a few groups going. And it seemed I was slowly developing a reputation that, “You can go to Mr. Howley. He is easy to talk to and he will listen and keep it confidential.” And it even got to the point that some students would ask to be in “group” even though they were not exactly sure what “group” was or what it meant. They just knew it wasn’t a you are in an “in-trouble group”, a “drug group”, or “anger management group.”

I was going to only work there for three years but I began to enjoy it so much that I stayed another two. A highlight before I left was getting permission for my two groups to join together and meet for a few hours during a school day. The principal gave me permission, but the students resisted at first. They liked their own group and wanted to stay in the safety of that group. I finally got it to happen and for me it was an amazing experience. I remember that all I said to the 25 students, sitting in a big circle in our school's music room was, "You all know why we are here and you know what to do." I don't think I said another word for two or three hours! I noticed how they stayed so present, talked so openly, allowed silence to linger, shared their feelings, worked out some previous conflicts, and confronted some new ones. I remember one student saying, as they shared their anxiety about my leaving, "We don't need Mr. Howley to continue to meet next year. We can run our own group just like we are now"!

By 2010, I retired as a counselor in the high school. One day, almost a year later, I received an email from an English teacher in the school I had worked in, who had herself confided in me many times over the years while I was working there. She told me that she had recently asked the students to write a paper about a person who had made a significant difference in her life. When the teacher read a particular paper, one from Sarah, she requested her permission to share the paper with me. Below I shared some excerpts from the paper I received written by Sarah. Again, I want to emphasize once again, that although she is talking about me, it is the person-centered approach that she is experiencing in her interactions with me. Sarah titled her essay, *"Snapshot Memory: Yourself and a Person" (2011)*.

Student: Sara's Perspective

Sara writes:

High school never seemed like a big deal to me, even on the first day I felt confident and excited to start the day. I had lots of friends, so I knew popularity wasn't going to be an issue. At the time, I didn't think my school work would be either. I thought it was going to be just like middle school since I was only a freshman. Well, I was in for a rude awakening . . .

The first couple months of high school seemed to fly by, they were easy and everything seemed to be going smoothly with friends, boys and school work (so I thought). My friends were better than ever, we hung out every weekend, all the time.

It wasn't until about March when things started to hit me. . .

Now, anyone that knows me can tell you that I don't stop talking, laughing or making jokes. I'm usually very fun and peppy and always have a smile on my face. That's why when my mood started changing, people began to wonder and worry what was going on. . .

This is when I was introduced to Mr. Howley, my high school guidance counselor. I always hated the idea of therapy or having someone tell me how to live my life. My parents had tried to go to family counseling but after one or two sessions, we never went back. I've never had any sense of consistency in my life at all and I believe that my school work and even social life reflected on that.

I cannot emphasize enough the power of the three conditions or attitudes of being understanding, accepting, and being genuine! These attitudes became, at my core, who I am. Kids at this age have generally become less trusting, just at the time that they have become most vulnerable. They are beginning for the first time to feel deeply and they are for the first time, thinking deeply about their life with major decisions confronting them. Where do they turn when they don't want people telling them what to do but want desperately for someone to listen and understand them? This is where I think Sarah was when I first met her.

It is easy to say that Mr. Howley had completely changed my life for the better, and made me realize my priorities without criticizing me. He put himself in my shoes and tried to better understand my situation so he could help me get through it and pass my freshman year of high school.

We continued to have one-on-one sessions for a couple weeks during my study halls. If I needed anything all I had to do was go down to his office and it instantly calmed me down. Mr. Howley had this way about him and even his room put me in the comfort zone I never had at home. It didn't look like the other guidance counselors' offices. In each corner of the room he had his own lamp so that when he turned off the lights, the lamps provided a dim glow of comfort and serenity. It was so calming to sit there even if we never said a word, it was almost spiritual and I loved that about his office. Our sessions usually consisted of a few minutes in the beginning of just sitting there in peace and quiet so I can calmly collect my thoughts. Sometimes I wasn't calm at all, and he was okay with that. There were never language or mood restrictions and I was never judged for what I said. It was the most comfortable and open environment that I wanted to share with everyone. Well, it turns out I could.

It was strange for me to enter a high school at my age. I was now in my seventies. I had not worked in high school for many, many years. When I was young, students could easily identify with me and connect with me as a friend. I didn't buy into the bureaucracy and the kids could see that in me. As this age I had little experience of their world and theirs of mine. Yet I slowly began to see we could relate person to person. This was always the case. How could I ever have doubted it?

What had not changed at all was that I did not see them as children or adolescents but as people. They began to sense that in me. They saw that my office was different from the other counselors. It was homey and inviting. I would ask them questions about their life. I would share my thoughts and feelings about being here in the building at my age. Some began to see and feel the genuineness in me and started to come down to my office, "just to hang out". They

would see that they were welcome to be themselves in this what I call a “sacred space”. They started to talk. As they felt listened to they would tell others about being in my office.

Mr. Howley held sessions during class called “group”. Group happened once a week and usually rotated between blocks so you weren’t constantly missing the same class. He must’ve held at least three or four groups a school year and I always attended two of them. Size didn’t matter; there could be five to fifteen people in group, just as long as when that bell rang, everyone walked out of that room satisfied with what they got out of it.

“Why do you want to join group?”

Mr. Howley asked me this during one of our meetings and I honestly didn’t know how to answer it. I just wanted to be with others that could feel the same pain that I was feeling and have people that can easily relate to me, because I knew my friends couldn’t. I hoped that someone would say something about their social life, school work or life at home that I can instantly relate to and understand what they were saying. I wanted to help others and in turn, help myself. Then, he asked me another question that was even harder. I couldn’t even answer this one right away, and three years later, I still can’t.

“Who are you?”

That’s what he asked me. I sat there stunned and shocked that I didn’t know the answer. He looked at me, smiled a little and said: *“Don’t feel bad, you’re not the only one. And you won’t be the only one in group with the feelings that you’ve been bottling up.”*

Hearing that was like lifting fifty pounds off of my shoulders. I felt so relieved that I was finally coming out of my shell. It wasn’t long until group started on a regular basis. Through the tears and laughs we all spoke at one point and reached out to others we wouldn’t even think of speaking to in the halls. That’s the beauty of group, not knowing anyone when you get in there. Sure, I had a friend or two in there, but no one I was really close with and I liked that. I found things out about people that I would’ve never known if I kept judging them the way I did in the classroom and in the halls. Confidentiality was another thing I really liked, everything was private and we were sworn to keep it that way. It made everyone feel really comfortable and trust was always a big thing. Group went on for the rest of the year, and the year after that, and the year after that. Unfortunately, my family problems and school work stayed the same but I still had that escape that I couldn’t get at home, I found in Mr. Howley’s office.

On June 10th, 2009 I got the worst news of my life. One of my close friends was in a terrible car accident and wasn’t going to make it. We were all distraught but Mr. Howley let us use his office all day long. I remember that day like it was yesterday, he helped me through so much and to get me through it, the loss of a friend wasn’t easy. I continued

to meet with Mr. Howley and even called him throughout the summer. He was one of those people that would drop everything to help someone else; he was so selfless and kind. I could always go to him with anything I needed.

No other guidance counselor spoke to his pupils the way Mr. Howley did, and no one could make such an impact on our lives.

Now, a lot of people might call me crazy to feel this way about a guidance counselor but he wasn't just a counselor to us, he was a friend, a best friend.

To me, I became not a counselor, but a facilitator. As a facilitator, having the attitudes of acceptance, understanding and genuineness greatly influence the student. This experience increases the probability of the student experiencing the facilitator as actually empathizing with them, receiving their feelings unconditionally, and being genuine. A relationship with these conditions creates an environment of trust: trust of the facilitator, trust in the relationship, and most importantly, trust in themselves. These experiences will probably last a lifetime.

Howard Kirschenbaum in his film** about Carl Rogers points out that Rogers described the three attitudes resulting in the client experiencing three core conditions. In the last paragraph above Sarah is describing my acceptance of her. She sees and feels me as a friend and that helps her to feel the experience of unconditional positive regard. Being now in my eighties and having been received that way by others, I know that experience will never leave her. She will always want that for herself and for others in her life. It is now in her, a part of her, in essence who is! It will be a grounding place for her. She knows that this is possible. She will strive to be that what is always now in her and she will want to provide that experience to her children, her friends, her partner, her family and the world. When all of us can have this opportunity early we start bringing peace to the world.

Every so often it makes me sad to think that speaking to him on a regular basis isn't as easy as it used to be, but I'll take everything he taught me with me to college and hopefully become the counselor I've always wanted to be . . .

Sarah
4/8/11

Conclusion

My intent in this paper has been to give a voice to just three students that I have met with over many years, and their experience of PCA, the person-centered approach, at different ages of adolescence while in middle and high school. The three students who engaged with their me as their school counselor (at different points in my career) had a profound impact on my learning about what can be possible in schools when students have opportunities to have a safe place to

share their most vulnerable feelings. I was practicing as best I could, the person-centered approach. My intent was to invite you to enter into the world of these three adolescents as they shared their experience of the person-centered/client-centered approach, through their meetings and time with me as a practicing person-centered way of being.

From my own perspective, as well as the perspective of these and many other students I have met over the years, the person-centered approach is a very subtle, intense, long-lasting and transforming experience for both the student and the counselor. I imagine that what I was doing and continue to do with most of my clients is referred to by Janet M. Sims*** as a process of *indwelling*. Sims says, "The term indwell was taken from Michael Polanyi (1958), but Carl Rogers (1951) describes the same process with different words in his explication of client-centered therapy. Indwelling is immersion of oneself in the subject at hand, (in my case, Kathy, Shirley, and Sarah) in order to know it (each of them) in a way that is impossible with detached observation". I realize in writing this paper that *indwelling* has been my life's work.

I have been studying and training in meditation for the last fifteen years. Usually, no matter what school of meditation, they teach you to focus on your breath. In truth, my first meditation instructor was Carl Rogers. If you observe Carl Rogers in the film, *Gloria*, you see a person who can focus his mind on a person in the same way that meditation guides you to focus on your breath. Carl Rogers was a powerful meditator. When he listened, as he did to me once in a room filled with over a hundred people, it was as if everyone disappeared and I only experienced his face, his words, his gaze upon me. I felt him being inside of me, hearing me better than I could hear myself. I have had similar experiences with others who, it seemed, just wanted to "*be with*" me in my experience or to use the words of another client-centered therapist, Adam Quinn****, "wants to understand for no other reason but to understand."

As I look at my life's work, I think that what I have been doing and hope to continue to do, is "make the (my) clients the subject", that is, *indwell*, rather than the objects of my learning.

* *The Other Side of the Wall: Unbreakable*(2021).

**Film: Carl Rogers and the Person-Centered Approach, Howard Kirschenbaum, 2003

***Client-Centered Therapy, The Art of Knowing, Person-Centered Review, Vol.4. No. 1
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****A Person-Centered Approach and the Rogerian Tradition, A Handbook