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"This is me sitting down on the step with myself"

Mindfulness and Dialogical Journal Writing in the Person-centred Approach[1]

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Abstract

In this article the person-centred approach is suggested as one theoretical understanding of a particular form of expressive and reflective writing using dialogue. It is also suggested that the person-centred approach is close to the practice of mindfulness, which has been aligned more with cognitive therapy in the literature for the prevention of relapse in the treatment of depression. Through a form of dialogical journal writing, "Jane," who had previously consulted her doctor and a counsellor about depression, found nurturing and non-judgemental qualities in a "voice" which she created. The therapeutic potential of this form of writing is presented here through a case study of Jane, who also used a form of mindfulness in dialogical writing to increase her awareness and her well-being in everyday life. Setting boundaries at work, for example, was a key area of change which Jane was able to articulate and which she ascribed to the practice of writing. A feminist critique of the person-centred approach is outlined and suggestions for further research into self-help using creative writing and mindfulness are indicated.

> *Yet there is, I believe, a much more important reason for my writing. It seems to me that I am still—inside—the shy boy who found communication very difficult in interpersonal situations: who wrote love letters which were more eloquent than his direct expressions of love.… That boy is still very much a part of me. Writing is my way of communicating with a world to which, in a very real sense, I feel I do not quite belong. I wish very much to be understood, but I don't expect to be.* (Rogers, 1978, p. 80)

Carl Rogers, in this reflection in later life about his motivation to write and his shyness, understands why some people choose to write rather than to talk. Both Jane (a chosen name for collaborative research purposes) and I would share Rogers' views about writing, with the additional sense that it is our way of communicating with parts of our inner selves, the private as well as the public worlds.

This article illustrates Jane's personal journal writing, capturing a therapeutic process on paper, using reflective and dialogical writing. Drawing on Buddhist practices, and paraphrasing Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is about focusing in the moment, on purpose and non-judgementally. I am taking Kabat-Zinn's (2005) understanding of mindfulness as "an openhearted, moment-to-moment, non-judgemental awareness" (p. 24). In part, I will also be referring to my own personal experience of coming to know mindfulness through writing and a series of chance encounters.

In exploring mindfulness and the person-centred approach, I have taken Rogers' own view of his theory as a clinical philosophy with its roots in, amongst other philosophical traditions, phenomenology, and the inviolable subjectivity of individual experience (Rogers, 1980; Tudor & Worrall, 2006). It is this lack of social awareness and intense focus on individual experience that has caused the person-centred approach to be critiqued as Western and ethnocentric. I would also add a feminist critique of the power imbalance in the person-centred therapeutic relationship with its focus on personal agency and lack of attention to social oppression. Feminist ideas also inform the discussion about self-help and power in therapeutic relationships (Proctor, 2002).

The research base for this exploration draws on a case study of Jane's experience of dialogical, personal journal writing, and also my own experience as a therapist, a mindfulness novice, and a personal journal writer (Wright, 2003). Feminist researchers have encouraged reciprocity between researcher and researched, striving to be both dynamic subject and object, bridging the conventional separation of researcher and subect/participant. Nonetheless, it is entirely my choice as researcher and author to select theoretical lenses through which to view Jane's words. In her writing, Jane created a nurturing, empathic, non-judgemental presence which I am connecting with Rogers' theories of "facilitative conditions" (Rogers, 1957). Usually known as the core conditions, Rogers suggested that empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence on the part of the therapist were sufficient for therapeutic change to take place. By capturing a "voice" in writing that was different from the critical, negative "automatic thoughts" known to be a part of the depression and anxiety that Jane had been diagnosed with at one point in her life (Gilbert, 2000), she found a route to

maintain her sense of well-being. She said that if she did not write every morning just after waking, she felt less calm during the day: *"If I don't, I feel things differently during waking hours. Ask Tom, my husband, ask the kids."*

Jane had tried counselling but preferred her writing dialogues. These were originally influenced by various forms of self-help literature, ranging from the humanistic, in which working on the "inner child" was encouraged, to the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy she had most recently discovered (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999).

Although this is not a study of person-centred therapy, some of the key principles such as the actualising tendency, conditions of worth, the core conditions (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990; Rogers, 1957), and most specifically, unconditional positive regard, will be offered here as a way of understanding the therapeutic value of Jane's journal writing (Rogers, 1955) and how it connects with mindfulness. It could be argued that Jane's writing was a form of mindful meditation. By increasing Jane's awareness, the writing served as a first step to making changes in her life.

Based on three recorded interviews with Jane that took place over the course of a year, extracts from those transcribed interviews will demonstrate how a form of self-therapy evolved. The extracts in italics, representing Jane's "voice," are taken from those interviews. Extracts from my personal and research journals are shown in a different font. Through "writing as inquiry" (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005), this article will also help develop my experience of practising and teaching mindfulness to illustrate and further the ideas presented.

Mindfulness

> *The real practice of Mindfulness is nothing less than how we live our lives … life itself is the ultimate laboratory.* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)

This quotation from the audio CD accompanying Kabat-Zinn's book stands out for me because it resonates with my experience of being a novice in mindfulness. I was introduced to mindfulness meditation by a friend and former colleague, Shukla Dhingra, who had committed herself to regular Buddhist retreats and meditation practice. She brought some of Jon Kabat-Zinn's written and recorded work into the counselling service where we were both working at that time (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). I felt a strong connection to the profound simplicity of Kabat-Zinn's ideas, and hugely respectful of Shukla and her disciplined way of being. I was also in awe of the spiritual dimensions of Shukla's practice.

Intellectually, Kabat-Zinn's writing made complete sense, but the practice of mindfulness just didn't "do it" for me. The principles (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) seemed far from easy to attain: staying in the moment; a non-judgemental attitude; cultivating the openness of a beginner's mind; letting go of experiences and emotions; trust; acceptance; non-striving, and patience were not qualities I could claim. I was reminded of that time recently when a student in a class of experienced counsellors, a woman on her own with three children, said, "Yes, mindfulness and focusing on one thing in the moment is lovely, but you wouldn't get as much done would you?"

This extract from my personal journal illustrates a sudden realisation that now that I had no real need to multi-task. Given that the children had grown up, mindfulness meditation had become more feasible; the habits of the "doing mode," however, remain:

> For weeks now I've attempted the breathing meditation. I try counting, focusing on the breath; my mind races. Using the Kabat-Zinn recording, I am reminded that this is what minds do—no need to berate myself. Nonetheless I feel a failure. Another morning of whirling between tasks, wearing a range of responsibility "hats." At the keyboard since 7 a.m., then a meeting scheduled for 11 a.m. means moving. I walk to the bus stop stiff and still immersed in work. Sitting on the bus, I notice my shoulders tensed up although I'm no longer at the keyboard and have no immediate threat or cause for worry. I deliberately drop them, ease my neck out of its knotted position and take three long, deep breaths, as instructed on the tape. I look outside at the clouds piling up on the horizon, letting go of the rerun of a conversation with a student in my head, staying in the moment. Aha—so this is Mindfulness. I have calmed the "doing mode of mind." Maybe it is working then.

The most important realisation, after all these years of thinking I couldn't "do" mindfulness, was that I had always practised a kind of mindfulness by reading poetry (Mace, 2008) and by keeping a personal journal, using expressive and reflective writing. The real laboratory has been life itself, and the influences on me have included Shukla, Kabat-Zinn, and mindful meditation. Jane, too, had tried formal meditation, both when travelling and working in Southeast Asia and when Transcendental Meditation became popular some years ago, but she had found that her journal writing was a more effective way for her. She said:

> And um I've also in my late teens tried another routine I once had, just as a point of comparison, was um meditating … I found that quite transforming in the sense that I began to cope a lot better emotionally with things. Externally the change may not have been so evident, but it was a big change for me. I did do

> that; I did feel very committed for about 20 minutes in the morning, 20 minutes in the afternoon. I still do meditate sometimes and I find that very helpful but there's never been the drive that the journals have for that.

One of the benefits in the dialogical writing for Jane was to focus on her emotional state, but it also allowed her to relate better in the world. Jane aimed to *"have my feelings sort of here, to connect with the world."*

The synchronicity of meeting Jane quite by chance, shortly after arriving in the town where we both live, still makes me smile. Like Jane (who is about the same age as me), I am a migrant to Aotearoa New Zealand, and have worked and lived in different parts of the world. When we met at a party, we talked about what had brought us here and what sort of work we did. When Jane heard that I practised and taught counselling and had an interest in the therapeutic potential of writing, she started to talk about how she had kept a kind of personal journal for many years. Out of that chance conversation, the formal research proposal emerged and was judged to be low risk by peer reviewers. Jane and I met three times over a year and these interviews were recorded and transcribed. We agreed that the troubles that had led to Jane's seeking help from her medical doctor and from counselling would not be the focus of our meetings, but that we would explore the particular form of journal writing which had become a vital part of her wellness. I asked Jane if she would like to co-author this article but she declined.

Introducing Jane and the dialogical personal journal writing

Jane's life had been highly successful. She had achieved a senior position in her work and had a close family life. There were struggles, however, that had continued for many years:

> I think people, as a woman too, see with a richness that comes especially if you've been a mother. I think they think that you've got that ability to look at suffering and bear it. They might see you have a sort of maternal strength and people want some of that, people want that, they want that to nurture themselves. And they see it that it's a sort of … I think they see you as having this deep well, a deep well of that strength I think. And although I think it is deep in people you know as you get older in life that strength can be very deep but I think also it still takes a great deal to retain it. It's deep because it came from a lot of suffering but it's still fragile.

Being of a similar age, Jane and I belong to the generation that found ourselves caught up in second-wave feminism, active or not (Wright, 2009b). The Women's Liberation Movement, born in Western developed societies, was famously fragmented after the

1970s (Weedon, 1999), but for white, educated women like Jane and me, it provided a moment of apparent choice in our professional and personal lives. Rather than "having it all," however, my experience of being a working mother has been more akin to "doing it all," with the fierce and contradictory expectations (Greer, 1999) of the domestic world and the competitive working world. Jane's sense of some of the less visible demands on her at work and at home was highlighted in our third interview:

> And I think women worry about these sorts of things too, how do you deal with relationships and communities and obligations? … It seems to me that as a woman one of the things we do try to do is to hold things together. Somebody has to be there, sending birthday cards, you know talking with the children when you really just want to go to bed, you know somebody has to be there for those key relationships even if they're not always all that positive. Somebody has to have a view on the long-term network and that tends to be what women do a lot.

Reflecting on the anxieties and pressures of working life are one way in which we have found journal writing helpful. In addition, we have both, at times, lived in isolated circumstances and found that forms of writing, in Jane's case the journals, have helped ease geographical distance and emotional isolation. From the carefully covered exercise books with schoolgirl writing on the cover which Jane brought to show me, Jane's dialogical writing had evolved into a highly practised form of mindful conversation, a supportive dialogue about life's struggles with a non-judgemental Other.

> I think the journals are a way of going in and dealing with it … and I think for me the journal is, it's the me sitting down on the step with myself saying, "Come on, how did it go?" "Oh no, tell me some more about it, oh no, oh oh, oh did that happen? Oh that's awful, that shouldn't have happened." You know, it's like two little girls having a kind of friend there who will say, "Oh, oh really" you know, I mean it's that kind of sitting with me through it which is actually … and that I think links with … people sense it in you and that women have that ability to sit with suffering.

Jane was often in a role of supporting others, at home and at work, and found that in the personal journal writing she could offer herself the same kind of emotional and psychological nurturing as she offered family and colleagues.

> … I actually feel my energy go up, I feel better … and I'm not reassuring myself or anything like that although all of that is part of it, affirming myself, reassuring myself but actually it's as if there is someone inside myself that I'm still finding that

> knows more about, that can help me more get through this world in a good way and enjoy it.
>
> So I think I mean why would I write down, I think I write it down because it really does focus me. And sometimes I'm writing and I'm writing really quickly and it's all just kind of coming out and you know I'm obviously then in a really rich seam with feelings and, I think, so I think it's what writing is often it is very focused and you can reflect and it makes you stay with that.

In terms of mindfulness practice and its links to the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Jane found in self-help, clear connections emerge, such as the sense of focusing on the present moment, even if thoughts and emotions are uncomfortable; letting go of events and experiences; and the non-judgemental quality of acceptance of self. Similarly, my experience of writing a personal journal enables a particular way of being that bridges the person-centred approach and mindfulness practice.

Dialogical writing and the person-centred approach

An extract from my journal dated August 2006, just after arriving from the UK to live and work in Aotearoa New Zealand:

> "There is never a good time to pull your back like this," the physio says solemnly. And the first week in a new job in a new country is maybe not the best time. But it slows me down—and gives me space to think about this transition from familiar to new and different—and how it can be managed. I read the labels on the pink support bandages stacked up on the shelves in the cubicle, waiting. He comes through, pulling the floral curtain behind him.
>
> "Patience," he says, as I'm lying face-down on the couch, "keep doing the exercises and have patience."

Patience is not a natural quality for me. Like Jane, I have habitually kept a personal diary or journal since I was old enough to write. As a form of mindfulness, writing slows me down, helps to calm the "doing mode of mind" and allows a form of meditation to emerge. I focus on one thing, rather than multi-tasking; I express feelings and thoughts more readily in writing (Wright, 2009a). Recent research and writing bridging mindfulness and the therapeutic relationship frequently mention Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, but rarely the person-centred approach (Hick & Bien, 2008). What was certainly clear to me in our three recorded meetings was that the latter could explain the therapeutic benefits of the written dialogues Jane had created. The nurturing voice and Jane's way of connecting

with the core conditions in her relationship with the writing process highlighted the therapeutic value of positive regard in particular. The inner critic, a negative and judgemental voice, was silenced in Jane's writing:

> It's none of that voice; it's none of that, "Well what were you doing for that to happen? Well this is a mess now, you know I'm very disappointed in you."

Carl Rogers' early work on the non-judgemental, caring quality which he called "acceptance," and later, "unconditional positive regard," has much to say about how counsellors and therapists aspire to offer this to clients (Rogers, 1957). Later commentaries, which have extended and critiqued the term he used, underline the therapeutic value of feeling "prized" and cared for in a non-possessive way, with no conditions attached (Tudor & Worrall, 2006). The voice that Jane created in her journal was warm, approving, and encouraging; she described it as *"a nurturing, mothering, very caring loving presence."*

The crucial, loving quality of that voice was a way for Jane to "re-parent" herself in the dialogues. She had been influenced by self-help books dating back to the 1970s, and some of what Jane has woven into the written dialogues clearly shows influences other than the person-centred approach. The affirmations, for example, could be viewed as directive and possibly feminist:

> I began to use not affirmations but at the end of the journal, I still do this every morning, I tell myself um things like um you know um "I really enjoy being with you." You know ah, ah cause it emphasises that connection of myself with myself and "I'm really looking forward to having today with you. I love being with you."

Feminist practitioner-researchers using the person-centred approach have illuminated where the person's sense of agency and "power from within" are both encouraged and potentially undermined by therapist intervention, even by those trained in person-centred therapy (Proctor & Napier, 2004). The lack of a therapeutic relationship might also challenge an approach to therapy that is profoundly relational (Mearns & Thorne, 2000). Is a relationship between two people necessary for therapeutic change to occur? Jane would argue that she had created a presence with which she was in psychological contact. She talked about how important the affirmations were to her:

> Hugely for me and also I tell myself about values and qualities that I believe that are important to me and that I have those. So I tell myself for example I'm courageous because I remind myself how courageous I am because of the emotional difficulties I faced and continue to face.

Jane went to see a counsellor for a while and found it helpful, but was anxious about becoming dependent on the relationship with the therapist. *"I haven't been to counselling since I did the journals. I haven't been back."* Arguments for the need for psychological assistance are generally predicated on conventional therapeutic roles: client and counsellor (Rogers, 1951; Tudor & Worrall, 2006).

Forms of self-help have not been central to the person-centred approach, perhaps because the first of Rogers' facilitative conditions (Rogers, 1957) is that the client and the counsellor must be in psychological contact. Jane's writing appears to be strongly influenced by the self-help literature, such as the cognitive behavioural, but with little evidence of person-centred thinking (Norcross et al., 2003), which is a pity. Jane's writing is a way of listening to herself; she has created a form of Buber's I–Thou relationship. Is there a need for a therapist in the form of writing which Jane has developed? She thinks not. I have characterised the "voice" she has created in her dialogues using person-centred qualities, such as non-judgemental acceptance and unconditional positive regard. In addition, unlike cognitive therapy, for example, which assumes an expert or coaching role for the therapist in working with depression (Gilbert, 2000), the person-centred approach is clear about the client knowing best and being expert on herself. I am suggesting that a person-centred theoretical base might be useful in self-help work.

In the next section I look at how writing and mindfulness work toward therapeutic benefits. I will also argue that Jane is involved in writing for self-help. Thus, she is not compliant, literally, with the very first of the six conditions for therapeutic change (that the client and the counsellor are in psychological contact) and yet change is apparent to her and to those close to her.

Bringing mindfulness and the person-centred approach together

> *It has been my experience that persons have a basically positive direction.* (Rogers, 1974, p. 26)

Of the "problem-based" therapies, person-centred therapy is most aligned with positive psychology and the postmodern therapies based on social constructionism (Gergen, 1999). Collaborative ways of working are emphasised where the client's personal agency, rather than the expertise of the therapist, is seen as the healing factor (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). Person-centred therapy is centrally concerned with increasing clients' trust in their organismic self and in being able to listen to themselves with more acceptance. Rogers (1974) says:

> *It is the client who knows what hurts, what directions to go, what problems are crucial, what experiences have been deeply buried. It began to occur to me that unless I had a need to demonstrate my own cleverness and learning, I would do better to rely upon the client for the direction of movement in the process.* (pp. 11–12)

I often think about this revolutionary statement when saying to clients, "You're the expert on you." Jane's experience when working overseas in an isolated situation confirmed her sense of trust in her own thoughts and feelings, and her mistrust of being understood by others:

> As if when I was eight, I didn't have anyone really to talk to … I had a few European friends, but I'm very private and I suppose in some way I guess partly until well into my forties, I kind of thought I was the best expert on me. I also thought it wasn't very safe to talk about how I felt. I wasn't at all sure I would be understood.

Rogers would be the first to validate Jane's preference for relying on her own experience rather than that of the experts, even benign, person-centred ones. He says:

> *By listening to the feelings within, the client reduces the power others have had in inculcating guilts and fears and inhibitions, and is slowly extending the understanding of, and control over, self.* (Rogers, 1978, p. 12)

Jane's experience of the dialogical writing was exactly this greater opening to, and focusing on, her experiencing within and feeling more in control, providing her with more of a sense of agency rather than being *there for others, but not for me.* The links with mindfulness are also clear: thoughts and feelings, or sensations, are accepted just as they are; present-centred attention is cultivated, and attention is focused within (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). There is no denying the importance to Jane of her daily writing:

> And so I feel, I feel, I feel quite unhappy I would have to say at a deep level if I don't do it. I actually I feel I'm back to that kind of um where I don't really matter. I'm there to make other people inside okay. And so I think I wonder why it's such an impact just to do it. You know it's a reflex, it's a complete reflex. It's as much of a reflex as drinking a glass of water for me.

The process of writing has become habitual and profoundly beneficial.

There is not sufficient space in a paper such as this to do justice to the debate around therapeutic relationships and power. According to recent work influenced by feminist thinking about the dynamics of power in counselling and psychotherapy (Proctor,

2002; Proctor & Napier, 2004), the therapeutic relationship is always characterised by an imbalance of power, even within the person-centred approach. Crucially, in this way of working, the therapist is non-directive and strives to respond from the client's frame of reference, not the counsellor's own. "Power over" is to be avoided and yet, however far the therapist is responding according to the core conditions, the role as therapist is inherently more powerful than that of the client (Proctor, 2002).

Working independently, the dialogical writing helped Jane retain a sense of agency she did not experience in counselling. The writing also moved through the seven stages of the process of psychotherapy as outlined by Rogers (1974), from a loosening of feelings and a change in the manner of experiencing, toward more openness, and toward changes in the way in which Jane related to her problems and the way in which she related to others at home and at work. As the writing changed over time, it often involved the power of the dialogical "Other" to accept Jane and help her connect with her own sense of self-worth and the actualising tendency (Rogers, 1951, 1974).

> So going through yes the writing definitely evolved and the affirmations were really sort of quite in fact you know "I love you, I love listening, I love being with you," you know love being with myself and that's really very good. And that you know just emphasising my worth and the worthiness of this relationship with myself and noting them.

Dialogical writing, mindfulness and self-help

How might Jane's use of dialogical writing be described as a form of self-help using person-centred theories? She is, for example, clearly creating an environment in which her actualising tendency is fostered. However, as indicated earlier, mindfulness in the self-help literature is more often associated with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and one of its most recent offshoots, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

By 2002, CBT had become associated with Buddhist-influenced practices of mindfulness. It was while I was working at Derby University alongside CBT practitioners and teachers that the practice/research collaborations between Jon Kabat-Zinn and leading CBT scientist-practitioners came into view (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). I soon discovered one of the reasons for this coming together of apparent opposites: CBT, in my mind the least spiritual of therapies, had "tested" mindfulness along with other ways of working with and treating depression and anxiety, and according to empirical evidence, it worked (Segal et al., 2002). That is, its efficacy and effectiveness in reducing relapse with clients who had experienced four or more episodes of depression had

been subject to randomised controlled trials, the gold standard of positivist research based on the medical model, and found to be significant (Cooper, 2008).

Another reason for this powerful conjunction between mindfulness and CBT is the long-standing link between psycho-education, self-help, and CBT. Well-known workbooks, such as *Mind over Mood* (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995), have enabled those with mild to moderate depressive symptoms to treat themselves. For some people, in a brief therapeutic relationship or possibly using a computerised system (Grohol, 2004), the symptoms of depression can be relieved. Research continues into these forms of self-help, but mostly by scientist-practitioners using cognitive therapeutic assumptions. Mindfulness has been shown to improve well-being and attain positive outcomes. Mindfulness practices help people to learn how to recognise uncomfortable feelings, connect them with dysfunctional thoughts, and change them (Segal et al., 2002).

Several questions remain about the person-centred approach and self-help, and how the person-centred approach could inform a practice of mindfulness, with or without a therapeutic relationship. For example, would the necessary training in mindfulness practice be seen as too directive for some person-centred practitioners? Research into the potential of this kind of integrative or pluralistic framework might focus on case studies to see how relevant the combination of mindfulness, person-centred philosophies, and self-help through writing might be to different people at different times. More studies of journal writing “naturals” like Jane could address questions about this kind of reflective process. There is also a need to widen and deepen our understanding of how such writing encourages non-judgemental attention in the moment. I suspect that Carl Rogers would have supported such studies if they opened up new vistas or brought new insights into person-centred theory and practice.

Summary

Carl Rogers (1974) famously talked about personal experience being the highest authority, “the touch stone of validity” (p. 23). This article has argued that Jane’s personal journal writing enabled her to foster her actualising tendency and to create a “voice” that exemplifies unconditional positive regard. She has chosen not to form a therapeutic relationship with a counsellor. The person-centred approach, on the other hand, is predominantly a relationship-based therapy.

Jane has also used a form of mindfulness in dialogical writing to increase her awareness and well-being. Setting boundaries at work, for example, is a key area of change which Jane ascribes to the practice of writing.

Mindfulness is currently in vogue and has become widely practised in diverse, and in some cases surprising, ways. However, the Buddhist philosophy on which mindfulness meditation draws is centuries old and cannot be regarded as a fad. The links between the person-centred approach and mindfulness have been examined in this article by studying a practice of dialogical writing. The case study presented is also an example of how the person-centred approach might be seen as providing a rich theoretical source for "self-help" literature, in which there is currently a dearth of person-centred thinking.

Notes

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