What It Means to Become a Person

This chapter was first given as a talk to a meeting at Oberlin College in 1954. I was trying to pull together in more completely organized form, some of the conceptions of therapy which had been growing in me. I have revised it slightly.

As is customary with me, I was trying to keep my thinking close to the grass roots of actual experience in therapeutic interviews, so I drew heavily upon recorded interviews as the source of the generalizations which I make.

In my work at the Counseling Center of the University of Chicago, I have the opportunity of working with people who present a wide variety of personal problems. There is the student concerned about failing in college; the housewife disturbed about her marriage; the individual who feels he is teetering on the edge of a complete breakdown or psychosis; the responsible professional man who spends much of his time in sexual fantasies and functions inefficiently...
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Getting Behind the Mask

It seems to me that in order to become a "true" self, one must first understand how much of the problem is in the experience of being a "true" self. It is, in essence, the problem of defining oneself. If we can define ourselves in terms of other people's reactions to us, then we are in the process of forming a "true" self. If we can define ourselves in terms of our own reactions to other people, then we are in the process of forming a "true" self. If we can define ourselves in terms of both other people's reactions to us and our own reactions to other people, then we are in the process of forming a "true" self. If we can define ourselves in terms of all of these things, then we are in the process of forming a "true" self.
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I was facing a solid brick wall, too high to get over and too thick to go through. One day the wall became translucent, rather than solid. After this, the wall seemed to disappear but beyond it I discovered a dam holding back violent, churning waters. I felt as if I were holding back the force of these waters and if I opened even a tiny hole I and all about me would be destroyed in the ensuing torrent of feelings represented by the water. Finally I could stand the strain no longer and I let go. All I did, actually, was to succumb to complete and utter self-pity, then hate, then love. After this experience, I felt as if I had leaped a brink and was safely on the other side, though still tottering a bit on the edge. I don't know what I was searching for or where I was going, but I felt then as I have always felt whenever I really lived, that I was moving forward.

I believe this represents rather well the feelings of many an individual that if the false front, the wall, the dam, is not maintained, then everything will be swept away in the violence of the feelings that he discovers pent-up in his private world. Yet it also illustrates the compelling necessity which the individual feels to search for and become himself. It also begins to indicate the way in which the individual determines the reality in himself—that when he fully experiences the feelings which at an organic level he is, as this client experienced her self-pity, hatred, and love, then he feels an assurance that he is being a part of his real self.

The Experiencing of Feeling

I would like to say something more about this experiencing of feeling. It is really the discovery of unknown elements of self. The phenomenon I am trying to describe is something which I think is quite difficult to get across in any meaningful way. In our daily lives there are a thousand and one reasons for not letting ourselves experience our attitudes fully, reasons from our past and from the present, reasons that reside within the social situation. It seems too dangerous, too potentially damaging, to experience them freely and fully. But in the safety and freedom of the therapeutic relationship, they can be experienced fully, clear to the limit of what they are. They can be and are experienced in a fashion that I like to think of
as a "pure culture," so that for the moment the person is his fear, or he is his anger, or he is his tenderness, or whatever.

Perhaps again I can clarify this by giving an example from a client which will indicate and convey something of what I mean. A young man, a graduate student who is deep in therapy, has been puzzling over a vague feeling which he senses in himself. He gradually identifies it as a frightened feeling of some kind, a fear of failing, a fear of not getting his Ph.D. Then comes a long pause. From this point on we will let the recorded interview speak for itself.

Client: I was kinda letting it seep through. But I also tied it in with you and with my relationship with you. And that's one thing I feel about it is kind of a fear of it going away; or that's another thing — it's so hard to get hold of — there's kind of two pulling feelings about it. Or two "me's" somehow. One is the scared one that wants to hold on to things, and that one I guess I can feel pretty clearly right now. You know, I kinda need things to hold on to — and I feel kinda scared.

Therapist: M-hm. That's something you can feel right this minute, and have been feeling and perhaps are feeling in regard to our relationship, too.

C: Won't you let me have this, because you know, I kinda need it. I can be so lonely and scared without it.

T: M-hm, m-hm. Let me hang on to this because I'd be terribly scared if I didn't. Let me hold on to it. (Pause)

C: It's kinda the same thing — Won't you let me have my thesis or my Ph.D. so then . . . 'Cause I kinda need that little world. I mean. . . .

T: In both instances it's kind of a pleading thing too, isn't it? Let me have this because I need it badly. I'd be awfully frightened without it. (Long pause.)

C: I get a sense of . . . I can't somehow get much further. . . . It's this kind of pleading little boy, somehow, even . . . What's this gesture of begging? (Putting his hands together as if in prayer) Isn't it funny? 'Cause that . . .

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T: You put your hands in sort of a supplication.

C: Ya, that's right! Won't you do this for me, kinda . . . Oh, that's terrible! Who, me, beg?

Perhaps this excerpt will convey a bit of the thing I have been talking about, the experiencing of a feeling all the way to the limit. Here he is, for a moment, experiencing himself as nothing but a pleading little boy, supplicating, begging, dependent. At that moment he is nothing but his pleadingness, all the way through. To be sure he almost immediately backs away from this experiencing by saying "Who, me, beg?" but it has left its mark. As he says a moment later, "It's such a wondrous thing to have these new things come out of me. It amazes me so much each time, and then again there's that same feeling, kind of feeling scared that I've so much of this that I'm keeping back or something." He realizes that this has bubbled through, and that for the moment he is his dependency, in a way which astonishes him.

It is not only dependency that is experienced in this all-out kind of fashion. It may be hurt, or sorrow, or jealousy, or destructive anger, or deep desire, or confidence and pride, or sensitive tenderness, or outgoing love. It may be any of the emotions of which man is capable.

What I have gradually learned from experiences such as this, is that the individual in such a moment, is coming to be what he is. When a person has, throughout therapy, experienced in this fashion all the emotions which organismically arise in him, and has experienced them in this knowing and open manner, then he has experienced himself, in all the richness that exists within himself. He has become what he is.

The Discovery of Self in Experience

Let us pursue a bit further this question of what it means to become one's self. It is a most perplexing question and again I will try to take from a statement by a client, written between interviews, a suggestion of an answer. She tells how the various façades by which she has been living have somehow crumpled and collapsed,
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...brings a feeling of confusion, but also a feeling of relief. She continues:

You know, it seems as if all the energy that went into holding the arbitrary pattern together was quite unnecessary — a waste. You think you have to make the pattern yourself; but there are so many pieces, and it is so hard to see where they fit. Sometimes you put them in the wrong place, and the more pieces misfitted, the more effort it takes to hold them in place, until at last you are so tired that even that awful confusion is better than holding on any longer. Then you discover that left to themselves the jumbled pieces fall quite naturally into their own places, and a living pattern emerges without any effort at all on your part. Your job is just to discover it, and in the course of that, you will find yourself and your own place. You must even let your own experience tell you its own meaning; the minute you tell it what it means, you are at war with yourself.

Let me see if I can take her poetic expression and translate it into the meaning it has for me. I believe she is saying that to be herself means to find the pattern, the underlying order, which exists in the ceaselessly changing flow of her experience. Rather than to try to hold her experience into the form of a mask, or to make it be a form or structure that it is not, being herself means to discover the unity and harmony which exists in her own actual feelings and reactions. It means that the real self is something which is comfortably discovered in one's experiences, not something imposed upon it.

Through giving excerpts from the statements of these clients, I have been trying to suggest what happens in the warmth and understanding of a facilitating relationship with a therapist. It seems that gradually, painfully, the individual explores what is behind the masks he presents to the world, and even behind the masks with which he has been deceiving himself. Deeply and often vividly he experiences the various elements of himself which have been hidden within. Thus to an increasing degree he becomes himself — not a façade of conformity to others, not a cynical denial of all feeling, nor a front of intellectual rationality, but a living, breathing, feeling, fluctuating process — in short, he becomes a person.

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...I imagine that some of you are asking, “But what kind of a person does he become? It isn't enough to say that he drops the façades. What kind of person lies underneath?” Since one of the most obvious facts is that each individual tends to become a separate and distinct and unique person, the answer is not easy. However I would like to point out some of the characteristic trends which I see. No one person would fully exemplify these characteristics, no one person fully achieves the description I will give, but I do see certain generalizations which can be drawn, based upon living a therapeutic relationship with many clients.

OPENNESS TO EXPERIENCE

First of all I would say that in this process the individual becomes more open to his experience. This is a phrase which has come to have a great deal of meaning to me. It is the opposite of defensiveness. Psychological research has shown that if the evidence of our senses runs contrary to our picture of self, then that evidence is distorted. In other words we cannot see all that our senses report, but only the things which fit the picture we have.

Now in a safe relationship of the sort I have described, this defensiveness or rigidity, tends to be replaced by an increasing openness to experience. The individual becomes more openly aware of his own feelings and attitudes as they exist in him at an organic level, in the way I tried to describe. He also becomes more aware of reality as it exists outside of himself, instead of perceiving it in preconceived categories. He sees that not all trees are green, not all men are stern fathers, not all women are rejecting, not all failure experiences prove that he is no good, and the like. He is able to take in the evidence in a new situation, as it is, rather than distorting it to fit a pattern which he already holds. As you might expect, this increasing ability to be open to experience makes him far more realistic in dealing with new people, new situations, new problems. It means that his beliefs are not rigid, that he can tolerate ambiguity. He can receive much conflicting evidence without forcing closure upon the
situation. This openness of awareness to what exists at this moment in oneself and in the situation is, I believe, an important element in the description of the person who emerges from therapy.

Perhaps I can give this concept a more vivid meaning if I illustrate it from a recorded interview. A young professional man reports in the 48th interview the way in which he has become more open to some of his bodily sensations, as well as other feelings.

C: It doesn't seem to me that it would be possible for anybody to relate all the changes that you feel. But I certainly have felt recently that I have more respect for more objectivity toward my physical makeup. I mean I don't expect too much of myself. This is how it works out: It feels to me that in the past I used to fight a certain tiredness that I felt after supper. Well, now I feel pretty sure that I really am tired — that I am not making myself tired — that I am just physiologically lower. It seemed that I was just constantly criticizing my tiredness.

T: So you can let yourself be tired, instead of feeling along with it a kind of criticism of it.

C: Yes, that I shouldn't be tired or something. And it seems in a way to be pretty profound that I can just not fight this tiredness, and along with it goes a real feeling of I've got to slow down, too, so that being tired isn't such an awful thing. I think I can also kind of pick up a thread here of why I should be that way in the way my father is and the way he looks at some of these things. For instance, say that I was sick, and I would report this, and it would seem that overtly he would want to do something about it but he would also communicate, "Oh, my gosh, more trouble." You know, something like that.

T: As though there were something quite annoying really about being physically ill.

C: Yeah, I'm sure that my father has the same disrespect for his own physiology that I have had. Now last summer I twisted my back, I wrenched it, I heard it snap and everything. There was real pain there all the time at first, real sharp. And I had the doctor look at it and he said it wasn't serious, it should heal by itself as long as I didn't bend too much. Well this was months ago — and I have been noticing recently that — hell, this is a real pain and it's still there — and it's not my fault.

T: It doesn't prove something bad about you —

C: No — and one of the reasons I seem to get more tired than I should maybe is because of this constant strain, and so — I have already made an appointment with one of the doctors at the hospital that he would look at it and take an X ray or something. In a way I guess you could say that I am just more accurately sensitive — or objectively sensitive to this kind of thing. ... And this is really a profound change as I say, and of course my relationship with my wife and the two children is — well, you just wouldn't recognize it if you could see me inside — as you have — I mean — there just doesn't seem to be anything more wonderful than really and genuinely — really feeling love for your own children and at the same time receiving it. I don't know how to put this. We have such an increased respect — both of us — for Judy and we've noticed just — as we participated in this — we have noticed such a tremendous change in her — it seems to be a pretty deep kind of thing.

T: It seems to me you are saying that you can listen more accurately to yourself. If your body says it's tired, you listen to it and believe it, instead of criticizing it; if it's in pain, you can listen to that; if the feeling is really loving your wife or children, you can feel that, and it seems to show up in the differences in them too.

Here, in a relatively minor but symbolically important excerpt, can be seen much of what I have been trying to say about openness to experience. Formerly he could not freely feel pain or illness, because being ill meant being unacceptable. Neither could he feel tenderness and love for his child, because such feelings meant being weak, and he had to maintain his facade of being strong. But now he can be genuinely open to the experiences of his organism — he can be tired when he is tired, he can feel pain when his organism is in pain, he can freely experience the love he feels for his daughter,
I fully understand that you have only a minute between your classes to read this, so I will keep it short. When we make decisions, we are often influenced by our emotions and past experiences. This is called the affective influence. The affective influence is the effect of our emotions on our decision-making process. When we are in a positive emotional state, we are more likely to make decisions that align with our emotions. When we are in a negative emotional state, we are more likely to make decisions that are not aligned with our emotions.

A second important factor in decision-making is the presence of a reference point. If we have a reference point, we are more likely to make decisions that are consistent with that reference point. For example, if you are deciding whether to buy a new car, you may use the price of the car as a reference point. If the price is high, you are more likely to decide against buying the car. If the price is low, you are more likely to decide to buy the car.

Finally, we are influenced by the information we receive. This is called the informational influence. The informational influence is the effect of the information we receive on our decision-making process. When we receive new information, we may change our decision. For example, if you are deciding whether to take a new job, you may receive information about the company culture. If the information is positive, you may decide to take the job. If the information is negative, you may decide not to take the job.

In summary, decision-making is a complex process influenced by our emotions, reference points, and the information we receive. Understanding these factors can help us make better decisions.
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C: "When (pause) long pause — properly standing with feel."

L: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."

C: "When (pause) when (pause) again..."

L: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."

C: "Lands (pause) (pause) (pause) I have all the..."

L: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."

C: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."

L: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."

C: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."

L: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."

C: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."

L: "That is a scary thing is that when you mean..."
think — I don't know, but I have the feeling that then I am going to begin to do more things that I know I should do. . . . There are so many things that I need to do. It seems in so many avenues of my living I have to work out new ways of behavior, but — maybe — I can see myself doing a little better in some things.

I hope that this illustration gives some sense of the strength which is experienced in being a unique person, responsible for oneself, and also the uneasiness that accompanies this assumption of responsibility. To recognize that “I am the one who chooses” and “I am the one who determines the value of an experience for me” is both an invigorating and a frightening realization.

Willingness to Be a Process

I should like to point out one final characteristic of these individuals as they strive to discover and become themselves. It is that the individual seems to become more content to be a process rather than a product. When he enters the therapeutic relationship, the client is likely to wish to achieve some fixed state; he wants to reach the point where his problems are solved, or where he is effective in his work, or where his marriage is satisfactory. He tends, in the freedom of the therapeutic relationship to drop such fixed goals, and to accept a more satisfying realization that he is not a fixed entity, but a process of becoming.

One client, at the conclusion of therapy, says in rather puzzled fashion, “I haven’t finished the job of integrating and reorganizing myself, but that’s only confusing, not discouraging, now that I realize this is a continuing process . . . . It’s exciting, sometimes upsetting, but deeply encouraging to feel yourself in action, apparently knowing where you are going even though you don’t always consciously know where that is.” One can see here both the expression of trust in the organism, which I have mentioned, and also the realization of self as a process. Here is a personal description of what it seems like to accept oneself as a stream of becoming, not a finished product. It means that a person is a fluid process, not a fixed and static entity; a flowing river of change, not a block of solid material; a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits.

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Here is another statement of this same element of fluidity or existential living, “This whole train of experiencing, and the meanings that I have thus far discovered in it, seem to have launched me on a process which is both fascinating and at times a little frightening. It seems to mean letting my experiences carry me on in a direction which appears to be forward, towards goals that I can but dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current meaning of that experience. The sensation is that of floating with a complex stream of experience, with the fascinating possibility of trying to comprehend its ever-changing complexity.”

Conclusion

I have tried to tell you what has seemed to occur in the lives of people with whom I have had the privilege of being in a relationship as they struggled toward becoming themselves. I have endeavored to describe, as accurately as I can, the meanings which seem to be involved in this process of becoming a person. I am sure that this process is not one that occurs only in therapy. I am sure that I do not see it clearly or completely, since I keep changing my comprehension and understanding of it. I hope you will accept it as a current and tentative picture, not as something final.

One reason for stressing the tentative nature of what I have said is that I wish to make it clear that I am not saying, “This is what you should become; here is the goal for you.” Rather, I am saying that these are some of the meanings I see in the experiences that my clients and I have shared. Perhaps this picture of the experience of others may illuminate or give more meaning to some of your own experience.

I have pointed out that each individual appears to be asking a double question: “Who am I?” and “How may I become myself?” I have stated that in a favorable psychological climate a process of becoming takes place; that here the individual drops one after another of the defensive masks with which he has faced life; that he experiences fully the hidden aspects of himself; that he discovers in these experiences the stranger who has been living behind these
becoming a person.

These are some of the elements which seem to me to be involved in discovering new aspects of himself in the flow of his experience as a participation in a rich, ongoing process in which he is continuously reading within himself. A person who is learning to live in his life and who is discovering the focus of education needs of sensitivity. Having a person who accepts the focus of education person who is developing a trust in his own organization an instance of the person who is open to all the changes of his ongoing experience; a person who is the stranger who is himself. I have tried to give my picture

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