

The Danger of the "Truth"

— Louis Hoffman

Humanistic psychology from its outset offered a divergent voice in the field of psychology. Even during the height of the humanistic movement, it remained largely counterculture. Respecting the individual and his or her values, it challenged the modernistic assumptions underlying much of behavioral, cognitive, and psychodynamic approaches to human persons. Some of these influences helped loosen the rigidity of other approaches, as evidenced by a lessening of orthodoxy in many psychoanalytic and psychodynamic therapies, which integrated aspects of humanistic psychology (e.g., relational psychoanalysis).

It could be maintained that **humanistic psychology was postmodern when postmodernism was cool**. The methodology of the humanistic traditions has long embraced the multiple ways of knowing which is now implicit in the postmodern epistemology. Science and empiricism are given their due, but they are not made into the gods or idols, as has become commonplace in many other viewpoints (e.g., extremists of the Empirically Validated Treatment movement). While postmodernism often relies excessively on a deconstructivist methodology, it is not necessary for it to do so. Postmodernism remains flexible enough that, when placed in a humanistic context, it can maintain an approach which embraces a holistic ontology. This ontology is best investigated through multiple methodologies

that embrace skepticism toward overreliance on any one method.

Humanistic psychology now has a responsibility to once again make its voice known through speaking out against the oppressive modernistic tendencies in the field of psychology. In doing this, we must also examine our own orthodoxies that have developed over time. As Eric Dodson maintained in his article *Humanistic Psychology's Shadow* (AHP Perspective, Oct./Nov. 2003), we have lost our edge and appear afraid to voice controversial stands. In a different context, Denise Levertov voices a similar idea on a more personal level in her poem *The Cloak*:

*But of the song-clouds
my breath made
in cold air
a cloak has grown,
white and,
where here a word
there another
froze, glittering
stone-heavy.*

(Denise Levertov, *Poems 1968-1972*, New Directions, 1987). Our words, once free and inspiring, have too often now become frozen and stone heavy. **Freedom, when only expressed in dry, static expressions, is no longer freedom.** It is even more disturbing that we have given up our freedom during this time when our voice is so badly needed.

Humanistic therapists are no longer on the leading edge. This is not a negative, as Nietzsche would



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point out, because few mainstream movements have the power to transform culture or people's lives. They serve rather to create restrictive and narrow structures to maintain the status quo. What is bothersome is that humanistic therapists rarely seek to assert their voice in dialogue with the mainstream and popular approaches. What we seek to transform has become too narrow.

I'm in agreement with Eric Dodson that we need to allow ourselves to be more controversial. Part of what makes humanistic psychology so valuable is that it retains an understanding of the great value in the tensions of the unknown. It retains a desire to free the oppressed. It retains potential to be bold enough to voice opinions and values that may not be represented in the majority, even if largely done now behind closed doors. The call to be controversial does not mean we must seek conflict with others. Rather, we can stand for our values and state them appropriately even where they may not be well received or may even be overtly attacked.

The humanistic voice is not lost; it is merely assimilated in some places and repressed in much the rest of our society. Yet the cry is still heard from many of the suffering seeking connection and meaning along with the professionals willing to acknowledge that cry.

This ought to call us to responsibility. Humanistic psychology in this century must evolve, but need not neglect the values which formed its basis years ago. As process philosophers and theologians have shown, our essence can remain the same while particulars change to meet new needs.

The influx of postmodern thought, which shares many of the same principles as humanistic psychology, evidences the need for this voice. Now it is important to seek new expression for old ideas while continuing to critically examine long-held principles and practices in light of our current times. Working together with the other divergent voices in psychology, such as postmodernism, components of positive psychology, feminist theory (and its subjective, cultural approach), and critical psychology, there is potential for humanistic theory to continue an important role in the broader fields of psychology and world culture.

People can become so indoctrinated in and convinced of their own values and beliefs that they become Truth in their own minds. **Anytime a version of the truth is deemed beyond the realm of question or criticism it becomes oppressive.** It is at this point that the "Truth" becomes dangerous.

Many examples can be seen in history, particularly religious history. Dramatic examples of dangerous truth involve different world religions at their adolescent phase of development. The crusades and the great inquisition of Christianity provide noteworthy examples. This is still seen in aspects of Christianity and other major world religions in various forms of fundamentalist thought.

America has exhibited this form of oppression in attempts to help other countries—we ride in with our own "Truth" and try to impose it. America has also expected its indigenous people and immigrants

(including forced immigrants) to become like "us."

Ernest Becker, in his book *Escape from Evil*, the followup to his classic *The Denial of Death*, maintains that **evil is connected to the desire to be heroic** (*Escape from Evil*, Free Press, 1975). In attempts to overcome our finitude, including our mortality and the limits of our human knowledge, we create evil. This important placement of evil lands it just a mere one step to the right or one step to the left of goodness. This view of evil, as opposed to our classic, dualistic view, provides a basis for understanding each individual's potential for evilness.

The classic view of evil in western thought, which philosophically emerged from Neoplatonism, separated good and evil into the categorical opposites of good and evil. This dualism was seen to parallel other categories such as body/soul, man/woman, white/

black (or non-white); often serving as the basis for discrimination.

Discussions of this oppression and dualism have been applied primarily in religious and cultural contexts, but it can also be noted in science. The heightened sensitivity and new understanding of truth postmodernism has afforded seemed to necessitate such discussions. However, what would happen if we applied this analysis to our own field of psychology? What does it mean in the context of being responsible as humanistic therapists?

While most of academia seems to be embracing postmodernism, psychology is only giving it surface attention. Even fields that appear antithetical to this view (such as theology) are beginning to embrace dialogues on these issues. However, psychology remains resistant. This can be evidenced in new increasingly restrictive (and arguably oppressive) ethics codes

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of the American Psychological Association. It is further evidenced in the Empirically Validated Treatments (EVTs). Even more disconcerting are the rumors that some would like to turn the EVT into dogma in future versions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Some EVT fundamentalists maintain that it should be considered unethical to practice any type of therapy except for the EVT.

Postmodernism is one of many voices available to help us challenge the fundamentalism of the EVT. Movements such as Critical Psychology (see Dennis Fox and Isaac Prilleltensky, *Critical Psychology: An Introduction*, Sage, 1997), Cultural Psychology, and Feminist theories also provide potential allies in this struggle. These allies are becoming increasingly important for those of

us invested in maintaining the freedom to practice in a manner consistent with our values.

The EVT themselves are not the problem or threat to humanistic and other depth psychotherapies. Rather, it is the professionals who **naively promote science and empiricism as the only legitimate source of truth in matters of therapeutic effectiveness**. Insurance companies and other organizations concerned about rising healthcare costs are quick to promote this perspective. Support for this narrow perspective can also be seen in several recent newspaper articles in major U.S. newspapers that attacked depth psychotherapy, particularly psychodynamic and other therapies that are not scientifically supported.

The debate over the EVT has quickly become a politicized, embittered battleground. An analysis of the process shows plenty of evidence that the battle

has become as much about power, control, money, and security, as about Truth. In the debate between the various depth psychotherapists and the solution-focused psychotherapies, the EVT become an important point of leverage. If it can be maintained that the only ethical, reliable, or valid approaches to treatment are those that are empirically validated by rather narrowly defined scientific criteria, then this affords power and financial security to those who practice these approaches. This does little for the many consumers who are looking for something more than simple solutions and desire more significant life changes.

Solution-focused and brief approaches can also be alluring to students. To become an effective therapist in these modalities requires less introspection and self-awareness, less ability to tolerate anxiety, and offers greater structure on what to do. These factors are comforting to neophyte therapists. When combined with the factor that many undergraduate students receive little exposure to humanistic or existential approaches, it is no wonder that our influence is so quickly decreasing.

If our voice continues to be silent on important issues, it is likely that our influence will also become silent. For many humanistic and existential therapists it may not be our desire or nature to be engaged in political controversies or power issues. Yet, if we believe in the value of what we have to offer, it becomes necessary for us to make the **sacrifice of engagement** on these issues. Through this type of involvement we make our relevance known and help to ensure that a space for humanistic approaches is maintained.

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