Building Progressive Bridges, Resisting Trump, and Humanistic Psychology: Part 2

(See Part 1)¹

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author continues to discuss the links between building progressive bridges, resisting what he views as the alarming danger of United States President Donald Trump, and humanistic psychology. The author once again makes significant use of the qualitative research methodology of autoethnography, which utilizes the researcher’s own relevant experiences in regard to what is being researched. In this context, the author reviews and expands upon the psychological and political work he has done since the January, 2016 United States presidential inauguration, inclusive of his change of perspective on impeachment after the November, 2018 U.S. midterm elections. In addition, the author describes his work in "contemporary person-centered facilitation" throughout his psychological and political activities in facilitating his support/discussion groups. The author contends that his work in building progressive bridges and Resisting Trump is consistent with the core principles of humanistic psychology.

Keywords: Humanistic Psychology, Progressive Politics, Resisting Trump, Impeachment, Person-Centered Psychotherapy.

Introduction

In recent years humanistic psychology has been increasingly concerned with issues of social justice, human rights, peace, bridging polarities, and political change, in the context of liberation psychology, liberatory social movements, and grassroots forms of resistance, coupled with consciousness raising and progressive politics (Benjamin, 2011a; 2011b; Davis, 2016; Freire, 1973; Kovel, 1996; Schugurensky, 1998; Pilisuk, 2015; Schneider, 2013; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). It is in this context that I will continue to describe in the present article my work in what I refer to as “building progressive bridges” for the purpose of resisting the agenda of U.S. President Trump, as I believe that this kind of resistance is both a relevant and crucial part of a politically engaged humanistic psychology that retains its core essence of genuine, empathic relationships between human beings (Benjamin, 2018a, Rogers, 1961, 1965). I will once again make use of my own experiences to review and expand upon my work in raising consciousness and forming progressive bridges to resist Trump, through both my work in facilitating support/discussion groups from a contemporary person-centered facilitation perspective² (Benjamin, 2018a, 2018b; Rogers, 1973), and my various progressive activist political activities, utilizing the qualitative research methodology of autoethnography, that includes the relevant experiences of the researcher as part of the research methodology (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2009). In the following section I will present what I view as a contemporary person-centered approach (Benjamin, 2018b) to facilitating support groups based on the work of Carl Rogers (1973) that I have used in facilitating my political support/discussion groups, and then discuss more specifically why I believe that building progressive bridges and Resisting Trump is consistent with the foundations of humanistic psychology.

Carl Rogers’ Person-Centered Approach to Facilitating Support Groups

The way in which I facilitated my Building Bridges Through Political Diversity group³ (Benjamin, 2018a) was based upon Carl Rogers’ (1961, 1965, 1973) person-centered approach to psychotherapy, which is at the cornerstone of humanistic psychology (Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental (2015)). However, there are currently various interpretations of what the essential ingredients of Rogers’ person-centered approach to psychotherapy truly are (Benjamin, 2018b). As I have described previously in reference to the 2016 World Association of Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling (WAPCEPC) conference in New York City, that I attended and gave a talk at (Benjamin, 2018b):

In Rogers’ approach to facilitating encounter groups, he advocated for the facilitator expressing, and regularly expressed his own, relevant feelings to the group in the context of being both a group facilitator and participant. . . . As I became reacquainted with Focusing [(Gendlin, 1981)⁴] and learned about Motivational Interviewing [(Miller & Rollnick, 2013)] and the extension of diagnostic labels to person-centered therapy, as described by Jobst Finke⁵, I understood that these basic Rogerian ingredients of empathy, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard in person-centered psychotherapy could remain intact with these modifications. What changed was the completely "non-directive" approach that Rogers (1956, 1961) is noted for. . . .it was argued that allowing for more flexibility in Rogers’ initial conceptualization of person-centered therapy was a way that had the potential to preserve the essence of what Rogers advocated for, in our society’s current managed care, short-term therapy dominant focus. In fact, from Rogers’ above quotes in regard to how he conducted his
encounter groups,⁶ it is evident that in facilitating his groups, Rogers himself did not have a problem with changing what he had previously set forth and became famous for in his person-centered approach to individual psychotherapy. (pp. 124-125)

Furthermore, there are undoubtedly significant challenges for the facilitator of a support group to be involved in the dual role of participant and facilitator (Benjamin, 2018b):

Being in the dual role of facilitator and participant in a support group can be a challenging and difficult role to effectively undertake. One needs to be able to switch back and forth between skillfully facilitating with keeping one's attention on all the participants in the group, and candidly self-disclosing about what one is thinking or feeling, or what is going on in one's life related to the group context. I believe that there are significant benefits to doing this effectively, not the least of which is the heightened authenticity of the facilitator, which is one of the hallmarks of both Rogerian person-centered counseling and group facilitation (Rogers, 1961, 1965, 1973). Although this kind of dual role certainly breaks away from the purely reflective empathic listening of the therapist or facilitator that Rogers advocated for in his approach to counseling and psychotherapy (Rogers, 1961, 1965), it is consistent with how Rogers himself facilitated his encounter groups later in his life (Rogers, 1973). The facilitator taking on the dual role of facilitator/participant, along with the facilitator occasionally using a more directive style when he or she feels that the client or group participant would significantly benefit from this, is all part of what I perceive as an outgrowth of Carl Rogers' original person-centered psychotherapeutic approach. (p. 121)

However, there was one aspect to my facilitation of my Building Bridges Through Political Diversity group that was decidedly contrary to what Carl Rogers had advocated for in both his roles as a psychotherapist and support group facilitator. This aspect goes back to my initial motivation in forming my group, which I have previously described as follows:

If these people could be stimulated to express their disapproval of the related sordid events that were continuously displayed over the internet, perhaps it could have the effect of weakening Trump's impact that has promoted hate crimes and discrimination. At any rate, these were the motivations that led me to give my ideas a try. (Benjamin, 2017a, p. 6)

There is no denying the fact that I had a "plan" for my group and an ulterior motive in mind, which was to weaken Trump's presidency and to make it less feasible that Trump would get reelected in 2020, or possibly that he would get impeached before that time. However, I also realized that from a psychological perspective, the most effective way to accomplish this in my group was to attract Trump supporters who felt "safe," and had the experience that the group was not trying to "change anyone's mind." Indeed the actual way that I interacted with anyone in the group was generally consistent with this way of being with others, but at the same time I must admit that I had a deeper political purpose in mind than the kind of essentially non-directive support group facilitation that Rogers described.

In fact, in a section from his 1973 book Carl Rogers On Encounter Groups entitled Behavior Which I believe to be Nonfacilitative, Rogers said the following:

A facilitator is less effective when he pushes a group, manipulates it, makes rules for it, tries to direct it toward his own unspoken goals. Even a slight flavor of this kind can either diminish (or destroy) the group's trust in him, or-even worse-make the members his worshipful followers. If he has specific goals, he had best make them explicit. (p. 71)

Now in all fairness to myself, I did try to do what Rogers advised, i.e., to make my goals explicit, as I honestly conveyed my true motivation in forming my group at our first group meeting, and in one of our follow-up group meetings (Benjamin, 2017c). But as the group developed, it became apparent that people did not appreciate my deeper motive of influencing Trump supporters to "change their minds" about Trump (Benjamin, 2017c). For the finalized wording of our flyer, virtually everyone in the group strongly advocated to include the phrase "without trying to change anyone else's opinions" after "learn from and listen to those of others in a respectful atmosphere," which became part of the second bullet on our flyer. Thus I felt somewhat hypocritical in facilitating my group, even though I believed that my deeper purpose was consistent with the basic premises of humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1961, 1965; Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental, 2015) in regard to authentic caring and respect for human beings, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or gender, and that this kind of authentic caring and respect for human beings was (and currently still is) dangerously jeopardized under the leadership of our President Trump (Benjamin, 2017a, 2017b; 2017c; Klein, 2017; Lee, 2017; Weisman, 2017).⁷

Of course there is much more about our current U.S. president that is of grave concern to a great deal of people, inclusive of the devastating possibility of nuclear war, the destruction of clean water and air and the environment, the attacks on the free press, the inclusion of suspected racists in prominent presidential advising capacities, the obstruction of justice, and the global continuous embarrassment that the leader of our country engages the American people in.⁷ Suffice it to say that I was willing to facilitate my group in the kind of extended person-centered way that I have described above while maintaining my deeper purpose in doing so, in spite of my realization that I was not being transparent with my group in regard to my deeper purpose.

Scharmer's Theory U and My Deeper Purpose

My deeper purpose in forming my group was a crucial element in my efforts to develop a group to "build bridges through political diversity." This was consistent with the research and theory known as "Theory U" (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004; Scharmer, 2009). Scharmer (2009) formulated and developed his Theory U, based on the ideas

of "Presencing," with an emphasis on the crucial element of the "source" or inner workings of the creative individual who originates an economic, social, or political group or movement in our contemporary times. I have previously described Theory U as follows (Benjamin, 2018b):

As described by Scharmer (2009), and previously by Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers (2004). Theory U is composed of "sensing, presencing, and realizing" that can be conceptualized in the shape of a U, where one initially senses input from the environment at the top left portion of the U, but rather than respond with ingrained habitual ineffective responses, one goes deep within oneself down the U and eventually reaches the bottom of the U, described by the term "presencing," and emerges with a fresh creative novel response up the right portion of the U, described as "realizing." This creative process is described as being at the core of universal spiritual processes in virtually all of the world's religions for thousands of years (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004; Scharmer, 2009). Furthermore, it is also described as being at the core of the creative processes of innovative scientists, artists, and business leaders. And the core of Theory U is at the bottom of the U, where presencing is experienced. This whole process has been described succinctly by some of the authors of Presence (2004) as follows: A profound opening of the heart, carried into action. . . . waking up to who we really are by linking with and acting from our highest future Self—and by using the Self as a vehicle for bringing forth new worlds...the point where the fire of creation burns and enters the world through us. (pp. 128-129)

In applying Theory U to my political diversity support group, it was apparent to me that the kind of deep Theory U transformation conveyed in the presencing bottom part of the U matched my deeper purpose in forming my group. Scharmer (2009) described three stages or shifts in perspective for the development in groups or organizations, that can be thought of simply as products, processes, and sources. To apply this to my own group, the products were the tangible results of our group meetings; i.e., what we talked about, who attended our meetings, our flyers, our newspaper ads, our reading list, etc. The processes were the way the members of our group communicated with each other during our meetings, our ground rules, the way in which I facilitated our group meetings in a contemporary person-centered way, the e-mail exchanges that were largely stimulated by me between our meetings, etc. And the sources were the initial states of mind or inner processes in which the group got formulated to begin with, and this goes back to my deeper purpose in forming my group.

As I have described above, my deeper purpose in forming my group was to weaken Trump's presidency and what I perceived (and still perceive) as the overwhelming disaster and danger that Trump was (and currently still is, even more so I believe) unleashing on our country-and the world.7 My way of trying to accomplish this was through reaching out and communicating effectively with Trump supporters who voted for Trump but were not racists, misogynists, or xenophobists, and were concerned about the rise in hate crimes and discrimination since Trump's campaign and election, and I later added bullying to the list. Although I initially candidly disclosed to my group my initial motivation in forming the group and conveyed this a second time, I learned that to keep my group going, I needed to not continue to share with my group my deeper purpose in forming the group. For it was important to the group to focus solely on listening nonjudgmentally to diverse points of view and "not trying to change anyone's mind." But although I agreed with this process during our actual group meetings, I also knew that I very much did want to influence Trump supporters to weaken their support of Trump. My hope was that bringing Trump supporters together with progressives and Trump non-supporters, and focusing on the horrid repercussions of hate that I believed (and believe) Trump had stimulated in our country, possibly would have the effect of moving the most open-minded of Trump supporters in this direction.

I believed that moving Trump supporters in this direction was very much in alignment with the core beliefs of humanistic psychology that Carl Rogers (1961, 1965) and Abraham Maslow (1962, 1971) advocated for over a half century ago. Furthermore, I also realized that the most effective way to influence people to "change their minds" was not to disagree with them or lecture them, but rather to "listen nonjudgmentally" and gently reinforce directions of change as they appear, which is at the cornerstone of the highly effective processes of motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), and which is included in the contemporary umbrella of person-centered psychotherapy, as I have described above.8 Thus I had come to terms (at least this is what I consciously thought at the time) with my deeper motivation to influence Trump supporters in my political support/discussion groups.

Moving Beyond Impeachment

As I have described in the Part 1 precursor to this present article (Benjamin, 2018a), I subsequently went through a few different stages in working through my above political conflicts in conducting my support/discussion groups, which resulted in me honestly and transparently conveying my deeper Theory U source of Resisting Trump to the participants in my political groups. These stages reflected the various names that I used for my support/discussion groups, as recorded in the titles of the sections in my Part 1 precursor to the present article (Benjamin, 2018a): Building Bridges Through Political Diversity; Resisting Trump Through Political Diversity; Resisting Trump, Building Progressive Bridges; Impeaching Trump Through Political Diversity. Related to my recent political perspective of impeachment in trying to form another political support/discussion group, I was quite disappointed at the time to hear Jared Golden, who was then the Maine Democratic candidate for the House of Representatives and who subsequently won the election, convey at two public meetings that he did not think at this time there was sufficient grounds for impeachment. On the other hand, I could not help but feel stimulated and inspired by the idealistic billionaire philanthropist and environmentalist Tom Steyer, who has founded, funded, and promoted the Need to Impeach movement with investments.
of millions of dollars of his own money, as well as by the impeachment efforts of the Free Speech for People organization, inclusive of their 2018 book on the grounds for Impeaching Trump. And it gave me hope hearing about progress that Robert Mueller was making in his investigations of Russian ties to leading associates of Trump, highlighted by the guilty pleas of Trump’s former campaign manager Paul Manafort and Trump’s former lawyer Michael Cohen, with the possibility of eventually actually tying Trump to the Russian conspiracy, which I thought could finally be solid grounds for impeachment. However, Trump’s recent firing of Attorney General Jeff Sessions and replacing him with Acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker to supervise the Mueller investigation, puts the Mueller investigation into serious jeopardy (Benjamin, 2018c).

Nevertheless, I now believe, based upon the results of the midterm elections in which the Democrats took over the House of Representatives, and as I have described in my recent article after the midterm elections (Benjamin, 2018c), that actually removing Trump from office is not feasible, and to attempt to do so in Congress is not the most effective course of action to take to reduce what I perceive as Trump’s program of destruction. But this does not change what I believe is the moral and ethical responsibility of all conscious Americans to make their best efforts at conveying that the tremendous danger of the United States president we now have to live under is completely antithetical to our democracy. I also believe that making these efforts loud and clear, whether it is through participating in protests and demonstrations, writing progressive articles about the destructive program of President Trump, running for political office, etc., are the most effective ways of building progressive bridges and Resisting Trump, and is consistent with the core principles of humanistic psychology that promote genuine, empathic relationships between human beings.

In this regard, I have written a draft for a statement entitled Trump’s Instigation of Hate Issues, which I discussed during a recent conference call of the APA Division 32 Humanistic Psychology Task Force on Hate Issues group that I have been a member of for the past 15 months. The upshot is that I will be presenting a summary of my statement during the community action segment of my group’s program at the Society for Humanistic Psychology conference in Oregon in March, 2019, assuming that our group’s proposal gets accepted. Furthermore, I had submitted a proposal entitled Creative Maladjustment, Impeaching Trump, and Humanistic Psychology to present at this conference as well, though if this proposal gets accepted I will need to rework my presentation on impeachment to accurately reflect my current views.

I am continuing to make my views about Resisting Trump known within the niches that I travel in, though with relative degrees of success. Recently I experienced a 5 day yoga and meditation retreat at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Western Massachusetts, and I was struck by how completely silent everyone was about the debacle of President Trump, whose violations of humanity are the antithesis of every ethical principle that Kripalu stands for, and most especially of Kripalu’s Buddhist primary value of compassion. I found myself becoming very involved in speaking my truth at my yoga and meditation retreat, and I actually got three Kripalu instructors interested in the possibility of doing something to offer a safe space/political support activity at Kripalu. But unfortunately the senior administrator whom I managed to speak to in person about my idea, was reluctant to do anything that could put Kripalu’s apolitical stance in jeopardy, as apparently there are Trump supporters who attend Kripalu (which is quite the mystery to me). I ended up getting put into place by this administrator, as although he said he would bring my idea up to the Kripalu Advisory Council, he conveyed to me in no uncertain terms that it was not appropriate for me to continue my involvement with him or Kripalu in regard to my idea in any kind of substantial way. Rather, this could only be considered if it were formally proposed by a Kripalu instructor, and I know that there is no way this is going to happen without my direct involvement.

**Conclusion**

I have had lots of setbacks in my work to Resist Trump, but I eventually dust myself off and get back to my work. For the situation is just too drastic for me to stop trying. This is especially urgent in the light of the recent Senate confirmation of arch-conservative, anti-abortion, pro-guns, president-above-the-law believer Brett Kavanaugh to a lifetime appointment on the Supreme Court, which was narrowly confirmed by the Senate after a great deal of conflict and turmoil, in spite of significant concerns about Kavanaugh having a background of sexual abuse and excessive indulgence in alcohol (Benjamin, 2018d). The 2018 midterm elections were encouraging to me, as the Democrats took over the House and I believe that there will now be at least some significant checks on what I perceive as Trump’s program of destruction, as well as some serious investigations into Trump’s "impeachable” offenses (Benjamin, 2018c). This is being significantly reinforced by the indivisible movement now including offense and oversight strategies to initiate new progressive legislation and committee investigations of some of the most serious of Trump’s lawless activities. This is in addition to continuing their defensive strategy against the worst of Trump’s policies, all of which was discussed in a recent national Indivisible conference call and is described in detail in the second phase Indivisible “offense” guide. And in conclusion I will say once again that I believe the debacle of Donald Trump negates the core values of empathy and authenticity that humanistic psychology stands for, and consequently as a humanistic psychologist I will continue to convey my perspective on this to whomever is willing to hear what I have to say.

**Notes**

1. See Benjamin, 2018a for the author’s Part 1 precursor to this present article. See Benjamin, 2018c for the author’s post-U.S. midterm elections article: Reducing Trump’s Destruction, Impeaching Trump: A More Integrative Perspective.

2. What I mean by “contemporary person-centered facilitation” refers to the expansion and extension of person-centered psychotherapy, both individual and group psychotherapy as initially formulated by humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1961, 1965, 1973). This expansion and extension incorporates other approaches that may involve the therapist being more active, such as motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) and focusing (Gendlin, 1981), while retaining the
authenticity and empathy core of Rogers' person-centered approach to psychotherapy. This was a key component at the July, 2016 World Association of Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling (WAPECP) conference in New York City; see www.pce-world.org for more information about this.

3. The initial name that I wanted to use for my group was Trump Supporters and Non-Supporters Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination, but I ran into difficulty promoting my group due to the political context of the title. The text for the promotion of my flyer for my group with the title Building Bridges Through Political Diversity was as follows: Bimonthly Meetings on Sunday Evenings… a discussion/support group to find common ground for all political persuasions to work on current issues that affect us all, inclusive of bullying in schools, discrimination, and hate crimes; voice your opinions, share your views, learn from and listen to those of others in a safe supportive atmosphere; appreciate the "deep stories" of those who think differently from you, based upon the books Strangers In Their Own Land: A Journey to the Heart of Our Political Divide, and Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis. [see Hochschild, 2016 and Vance, 2016].

4. The keynote address at the 2016 WAPECP conference (see www.pce-world.org) given in honor of Eugene Gendlin also included a live (remote) conversation with him, which occurred a few months before his death.

5. Jobst Finke has published a number of books in German. See the highlighted speakers section in http://www.nypprcr.org/speakers description of Finke and a listing of some of his books.

6. The quotes by Rogers in Benjamin (2018b) that are referred to here were taken from Rogers’ (1973) book Carl Rogers on Encounter Groups.

7. See the article Donald Trump is a National Security Risk. Here’s the Current #Trump Threat Level at www.indivisible.org/resources/foreign-policy; the books The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President (Lee, 2017) and No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump’s Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need (Klein, 2017); and the references in Benjamin, 2018a. For more information about the national Indivisible groups, see http://indivisibleguide.com and Indivisible ‘Movement Presses Legislators At Home on Trump Agenda, The Rachel Maddow show, 1/25/17, www.msnbc.com; and see the second phase "offense" Indivisible guide at https://indivisible.org/campaign/indivisible-whats-next/?id=36972.12450.g4k0U2krd&ks=1&k=6.


10. See the book To End a Presidency: The Power of Impeachment by Laurence Tribe and Joshua Matz (2018) for an excellent account of the history of impeachment in the United States, as well as the dangers and pitfalls of engaging in impeachment, whether the impeachment is successful or unsuccessful. I now understand that it would be virtually impossible, even if impeachment were to be accomplished, for Trump to actually be removed from office, given that the Republicans have maintained and expanded their majority in the Senate from the 2018 midterm elections. And I also am very concerned that there would likely be distressing consequences, including excessive violence, from a serious impeachment effort, whether successful or unsuccessful. Furthermore, I now believe that it would be counter-effective to engage in Congressional impeachment proceedings, in regard to preventing Trump from winning a second term of 4 years in the 2020 presidential election (Benjamin, 2018a, 2018e).

11. For information about Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health see www.kripalu.org. Note that in my book Modern Religions: An Experiential Analysis and Exposé (Benjamin, 2013), I placed Kripalu in the favorable category, i.e. as being beneficial to one’s personal development and spiritual growth, without having any cult dangers. In spite of my disappointment regarding Kripalu’s not being willing to take a stance or offer support in any kind of substantial way to their participants who may feel severely disturbed about President Trump’s actions that are completely antithetical to everything that Kripalu stands for, I still consider Kripalu to be generally beneficial and favorable to one’s personal development and spiritual growth, as I must admit that I experienced these qualities in my recent 5 day Kripalu retreat.


References


