We are all involved in what are sometimes called the 'helping professions'. I imagine we all have satisfying experiences of helping people to find solutions, or skills, or ways of coping, or meaning, or whatever else they need. We probably also have frustrating experiences of trying to help people who determinedly resist being helped in the ways we are capable of helping them, and the equally frustrating experience of helping people who want too desperately to be helped rather than find ways to help themselves.

I wish to talk here about the person-centred approach to helping, but before I do I think it is worth our while to look at the assumptions we bring to our profession. And by assumptions I mean the taken-for-granted ideas and images we bring with us, many of them so taken-for-granted that we are not aware of them.

For instance, what's the taken-for-granted model of helping that shapes our work with clients? Do we see ourselves as doing something to them, doing something for them, or doing something with them? The way we think about it makes all the difference to what we do. Do we set out to manage them in order to control their behaviour? Do we see them as needing our support and nurturance, and do for them what they cannot do for themselves? Or do we see work with our clients as a cooperative effort, striving to be honest and friendly companions with them on their journey?

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead maintained that 'every philosophy is tinged with the colouring of some secret imaginative background, which never emerges explicitly into its train of reasoning'. I believe he would say the same about every psychological theory. We all have an image, a sort of 'working model' of what it means to be a human being, even if we might not often reflect on what it is.

To make some rather crude distinctions, within the context of the 'helping professions' there are three images that have competed as 'explanations' of human behaviour over the past hundred years or so and which have shaped the way people teach, counsel, nurse, or case-manage.

Mainstream psychology has been based on the 'black box' image. In this image, human beings are essentially machines which respond automatically to external stimuli. Press this button and they respond in this way. Press that other button and they will behave differently. Human beings are neither good nor bad. Their notion that they choose their behaviour and are hence responsible for it, is a delusion. They are controlled by external stimuli. As helpers, we know that if we reward appropriate behaviour and punish the other kind we can get rid of self-destructive and anti-social behaviour and help people to live a productive life.

Psychoanalysis has been based on a very different image. Since Freud, we have been told that human beings are driven 'from the inside' — by unconscious energies which are essentially nasty, or at least nasty in their manifestations. We all have to learn to keep the lid on the garbage can of our instincts and anti-social tendencies. Human beings must understand the 'beast within' if they want to have any control over it. This is where psychological helpers come in, enabling people to understand what their unconscious is doing so that their ego can be in control and they can fit into a civilised society.

There is another image which shapes the way many helpers do their work. Some of us are inclined to see human beings as daisies or daffodils rather than as garbage cans. Imagined this way, as organisms rather than as machines, human beings are naturally inclined to move in a positive direction; they have an inborn tendency to move towards becoming all that they can become. Carl Rogers used an image, remembered from his childhood, of potatoes in the cellar vainly sending up shoots towards the light. They might never get the chance to grow into what they are capable of being because they might never get the combination of soil, light and air they need to do so, but the drive to 'become' is there just the same. Human beings are essentially good, but they need a certain kind of environment to enable them to become what they are capable of becoming. The seed "knows" how to become a daisy and in a nurturing environment it will do so.

I warned you that my distinctions would be crude. Cognitive-behavioural counsellors, and professionals with either psychodynamic or humanistic tendencies, will argue that their theories are much more complex than that. Of course they are. Nevertheless, I think we can make a valid distinction between professionals who treat people like machines and those who treat people like living organisms, between imagining children as essentially bad and needing to be controlled, essentially neutral and needing to be manipulated, and essentially good and needing to be nurtured.

I'm inclined to be a daisy person myself, but I'm well aware that for much of the time we function like machines. We do a lot of very complicated things without making any
decision to do them and without any awareness of doing them. The amount of our life that we devote to making conscious choices and decisions is very small. Most of the time the machine just goes ahead and responds to whatever needs responding to without interference from our conscious mind. And there's something to be said for the garbage can image. I can't look at much television news or read the newspapers these days without being aghast at the things people do to each other. Freud's depressing idea that deep down we are violent, sex-crazed beings bent on destroying each other and only kept in check by a veneer of civilization, seems somehow reasonable. But so does the need to explain the integrity, resilience, compassion and altruism of people I know or observe. And if my sense that my behaviour is not determined either by external stimuli or by unacknowledged unconscious motivation, and that I sometimes freely make choices, is just a delusion, then it is a very persuasive one.

The point I want to make is that the way we treat people is influenced less by the 'truth' about what it means to be human than by the 'secret imaginative background' we bring to our dealings with them.

In the 1940s the American psychologist Carl Rogers first brought the 'daisy' image to the profession of counselling. He observed that the then-conventional approach to therapy, in which the counsellor took the role of an expert, advising or manipulating the client into changing their thinking and behaviour, was not very effective. He became convinced that the most effective thing a counsellor can do is listen to the client and be their companion in exploring their situation and finding an authentic way of being in the world. He found also that the thing that makes the most difference between effective counselling and ineffective counselling is the quality of the relationships between the people involved. He developed a way of counselling which has come to be known as the person-centred approach.

Though the person-centred approach grew out of counselling, it is clearly much more than a way to help unhappy people become happier. The qualities that make a counselling relationship a good one are the same qualities that make any relationship good and they are especially critical in 'helping' relationships.

When Rogers first started developing 'client-centred therapy' in the forties, he thought of it as a technique. By the time of his death in 1987 he understood it much more broadly – as a 'way of being'. The change of label from 'non-directive counselling' or 'client-centred therapy' to the 'person-centred approach' is significant. Taking people seriously as people, talking to them 'person to person' does not just enhance our dealings with our clients as counsellors, teachers or case-managers. It changes our relationship to the world.

When Rogers first began writing about client-centred therapy he focused on the principle that each of us knows more about ourselves than any one else knows about us. We don't need an outside expert to tell us who we are, how we feel, what we need, how we should behave, where we should be going. When stress, depression or anxiety leads us to think we need an expert to tell us these things about ourselves, it is because we don't have access to our own deeper understanding. Perhaps we are shutting ourselves off from it. Perhaps we have spent so long trying to meet other people's expectations that we no longer recognise who we are and what we want. Perhaps our life is in such a crisis and our experience so fragmented that we are not able to listen to ourselves. Rogers argued that rather than seek advice from someone who pretends to be an expert on our lives (even though they have never observed our lives 'from the inside' as we have) we would be better off finding someone who is able to listen intently to our story and help us to explore it. He was convinced that we have within us the resources we need to deal adequately with our psychological problems, though we may need someone to help us get in touch with these resources and help us see our worlds more clearly.

Accordingly, Rogers developed a way of counselling which focused on two things: establishing a supportive relationship in which the client was not afraid to explore his or her experience, and listening intently to try and understand what it was like to experience the world the way the client experienced it. The aim of the supportive relationship was to enable the client to let go of his or her defences against acknowledging their half-conscious feelings and understandings. The aim of the intense listening was not to gather information in order to be better able to give expert advice; rather, it was to be a trustworthy companion in the client's exploration, so that they could look at things they would otherwise be afraid to look at and find solutions they would not otherwise have the confidence to find.

Underlying this was an understanding that personal change does not come from outside but from within. He wrote about an 'actualising tendency' a drive to 'maintain and enhance [our] organism', which humans share with all organic life.

Individually have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes and self-directed behaviour; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided

(A Way of Being, p.115).

When Rogers started to theorise about his new method of counselling, he saw it as a technique, a way of exploring the client's world by intensely listening and constantly checking that you are understanding properly. As a technique, it soon became stereotyped as something called 'reflective listening'. Rogers abhorred this expression, seeing it as a distortion of what he was trying to do. He maintained that in his counselling he wasn't doing 'reflective listening'; he was just 'trying to understand'.

His observations and research led him to give up the notion that good counselling was a matter of technique. When he set up research studies to support his conviction
that non-directive, client-centred psychotherapy was more effective than the other kinds of therapy available, the results didn’t come out the way he expected. Rather, they seemed to indicate that as far as the outcomes of therapy were concerned, it didn’t seem to matter much what sort of technique the counsellor used. What mattered was the ‘climate of psychological attitudes’. In other words, the relationship.

This was a radical notion when Rogers first argued it, and it still is. In the past fifty years, counsellors have continued to argue that this counselling technique is better than that and counselling gurus can still get rich and famous by inventing and selling a marvellous new technique. However, there has been plenty of research leading to the conclusion that the quality of the counsellor-client relationship is crucial in determining whether counselling is effective. Rogers was prepared to go much further than this. He argued that the good relationship was both necessary and sufficient for effective counselling. Counselling cannot help the client if the relationship is poor. On the other hand, if the relationship is good, the client will be helped no matter what sort of counselling techniques the counsellor is using.

Rogers’ research and experience had told him exactly what the ‘definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes’ consists of — and it isn’t just relevant to counselling.

There are three conditions that must be present in order for a climate to be growth-promoting. These conditions apply whether we are speaking of the relationship between therapist and client, parent and child, leader and group, teacher and student, or administrator and staff. The conditions apply, in fact, in any situation in which the development of the person is a goal. (A Way of Being, p.115)

These conditions are genuineness, acceptance and empathy.

Rogers developed this theory as a theory of counselling and personal change, but it soon became apparent to him that if it applied to counselling it applied to any sort of helping relationship and, if it applied to helping relationships, it applied to any sort of relationship. People are more likely to ‘grow’ in relationships which offer them empathy, genuineness and acceptance than in relationships where they don’t feel understood and accepted.

Genuineness implies being real, being aware of our feelings, not pretending (not even pretending to be a better counsellor/teacher/carer than we are), not hiding ourselves behind a professional front, being transparent. The more we achieve this, the more chance there is that the person in our care will change and grow in a constructive manner.

Acceptance implies letting our student or client be who they are without judging them, without imposing ‘shoulds’ on them. It means caring for them simply because they deserve to be cared for, not because it is our job or because we’re particularly noble or compassionate. It means prizing them as people who are doing the best they can in the world as they find it, even if to an outsider doing their best looks self-destructive or anti-social. It means appreciating that if we had experienced the lives they have experienced, we might well be acting in the same inept, self-destructive or anti-social ways. It means respecting them and their ability to grow and letting them see that we respect them. The more we manage to be positive and non-judgemental with the people in our care, the more chance there is that they will change and grow in a constructive manner.

Empathy implies an ability to ‘tune in’ to our clients, to sense accurately how they feel and how they experience their world. If we are really empathic, we will sense things in the client’s experience and communication that even the client is only half aware of. It is certainly not just a matter of listening to someone’s words and ‘reflecting’ them. It means finding our way into their inner world to know what it is like to be them. The more our clients or students see us honestly attempting to understand how they perceive their world, and the more we can achieve this, the more likely it is that our clients or students will grow and learn through their relationship with us.

Some people have tried to turn these three qualities into technical skills. They argue that we don’t know anything unless we have learned it. If we are empathic, it is because somewhere, some time we have learned from someone how to be empathic. If we are lucky we have just ‘picked it up’ in a family where empathy was valued and modelled. If not, we can go to an empathy training workshop and learn it later. The same goes for the ‘skills’ of acceptance and genuineness.

Empathy is now taken for granted as required for any kind of effective helping. Psychoanalysts and psychiatrists see the need to be empathic so that they can tell their patients what is wrong with them. Cognitive-behavioural therapists see the need to be empathic so that they can design appropriate routines to change their clients’ behaviour. I had a conversation recently with a professor in a university medical faculty who told me that empathy training was an essential element in medical education these days because ‘doctors who are empathic are less likely to be sued’!

There is something to be said for the argument that empathy is a teachable skill, but it is a long way from Rogers’ understanding. For him, empathy, acceptance and genuineness are not skills but a way of being in the world. They are not techniques which an expert can use to influence a client’s behaviour but essential qualities of a genuine relationship between two people. It is the relationship which matters.

The theory that our physical and mental health is affected by the kinds of relationships we have is not just based on Rogers’ observations as a counsellor. We have seen it confirmed in various ways by research, not to mention our own experience. The evidence of a link between the quality of the helper-client relationship
and the outcomes of helping does not just come from researchers and practitioners with a pre-disposition to seeing daisies. It comes also from the ‘black box’ and ‘garbage can’ researchers and practitioners. Evidence has been accumulating for several decades that infants who are deprived of cuddles and conversation do not grow as they should. Their physical, emotional and intellectual development is held back. The tragic case of the neglected Romanian orphans not only demonstrates the effects of deprivation but also the spectacular change that takes place in these children when they are adopted into a loving family. We find research indicating that the quality of an ongoing intimate relationship has an impact on the physical and mental health of the couple. In recent years, research on what works in counselling has confirmed that the single most potent factor which distinguishes between effective and ineffective counselling is the relationship between counsellor and client. It is clearly not the only factor, but it seems to be the most important. Research in education comes up with a similar finding. The kind of relationship children have with teachers and peers has been shown to affect both what they learn and how they learn.

William Glasser developed the notion of the quality world; every child and adolescent (unless he or she is particularly unfortunate) has a ‘quality world’ which is distinguished from their other, non-quality world. The quality world consists of those people who provide the means to satisfy their four basic needs: control, affection, freedom and fun. The people who are part of this quality world are people to be taken seriously; their opinions matter; their feelings matter; they can be trusted; they deserve to be listened to. People who do not belong to this quality world may as well be ignored. If they can't be ignored they can at least be resented or defied. Why should anyone care what they think or say?

It's interesting to reflect on who inhabits our own quality worlds, to see who are the people connected with our experiences of control, affection, freedom and fun. Then we can compare this world with our non-quality world and contrast the attitudes and behaviour we bring to each.

The question this raises for helpers, carers and teachers is: Do I belong to my client's or student's quality world? If I do, I can anticipate having some influence over them, working with them cooperatively, enjoying our relationship. If I don't, our relationship quickly degenerates into a power struggle, unsatisfying for both of us. Those of us with children have to also ask whether our children include us in their quality worlds? And if not us, then who?

Teachers and disability support workers may find that particular clients or students have no quality world to speak of. The people who should provide it are incapable of it or have given up. In spite of our best efforts, we may find that gaining the trust of someone who has had no previous experience of a quality world is a long and heart-breaking task.

We, of course, are professionals. We are specially trained. We have all the skills we need to do our jobs effectively. We know what works and what doesn't work.

Unfortunately, there is some evidence that our expertise can be a problem.

Our expertise and professional status can be a problem, not because our knowledge and professional status make us less able to help people, but because our dependence on our knowledge and professional roles is inclined to get in the way of the thing which makes most impact – the person-to-person relationship with our clients. If we are to take the research seriously, it seems that training and identifying as professionals tends to make us less able to empathise with our clients, less able to have a genuine, horizontal, person-to-person relationship with them, less able to accept and respect them non-judgementally. Our expertise makes us more able to be effective, but this is counteracted by the decline in our ability to have a genuine relationship with our clients.

When I first got interested in this some decades ago, I was impressed by some research which the British psychologist H.J. Eysenck had done in the fifties on the evaluation of psychotherapy. He wanted to know whether psychotherapy made any demonstrable difference to those who underwent it, so he looked at all the available research on the outcomes of psychotherapy and found that some of the patients or clients seemed to get better and some seemed to get worse. Meanwhile, if people suffering from similar neuroses did not receive any psychotherapy, some seemed to get better and some seemed to get worse. He concluded, therefore, that psychotherapy didn't really make any difference.

While I was still feeling impressed by this conclusion, I came across some research by Robert Carkhuff; he had looked at the same studies in a slightly different way and found that if people received psychotherapy they either got much better or much worse, while people who didn't receive psychotherapy got a little bit better or a little bit worse. Carkhuff came to the natural conclusion that psychotherapy can be for better or for worse, and then went on to demonstrate that the thing that makes the difference is the quality of the client-therapist relationship. He argued that when professional help is not available, people seek help from family members, neighbours or friends. If these provide genuine, empathic, accepting relationships, healing will occur. If they don't find such relationships, their condition is likely to get worse. Professional status and expertise increase the impact of therapy but not necessarily its ability to heal.

As a counsellor and teacher, I expect my counselling and teaching to make an impact. I am aware also that all professional activities may be for either better or worse, especially where the professional holds all the power in the relationship. It is central to Rogers' understanding that taking a high status position is an impediment to good counselling and good teaching, and that the professional is most effective when he or she gives up total control of the situation, enabling the client or student to make the key decisions about what they want to get from the interaction. It is not possible to take such a democratic stance unless we trust our charges, unless we assume the existence of something like an
'actualising tendency'. We need to believe that whatever they are doing, no matter how misguided it may appear, is the best they can do at this moment to survive and grow. We need to believe that if we provide a supportive, trusting and non-judgemental relationship, within which they are free to behave creatively, without being dominated by their fears and the expectations of others, they will move in a positive direction.

This brings us back to our daisy image. Daisies don't make decisions about growing. It's not something they do. Neither is it something we do. Growth is something that happens to daisies and happens to us. In his later writing, Rogers seems to be less interested in talking about an actualising tendency, as something which belongs to us as individuals, and refers rather to a 'formative tendency in the universe, which can be observed at every level'. Our lives are embedded in the life of an organic universe which is growing towards greater and greater complexity.

In thinking about the universe as organic, Rogers was plugging into a tradition of romantic philosophy which has been unfashionable for some time but is re-emerging now in the sciences. In this sort of universe, connections are all important. The universe is a complex system of relationships. Our personal becoming, and the becoming of the children and adults we care for and care about, are embedded in the universe's process of becoming. In such a system, no single element exists independently of the others. It's the connections, the relationships, which keep the universe in existence.

We can look at a crowded room and see it as a lot of people connected by relationships, or we can see it as a room full of relationships between people. The notion that we each have a substantial, independent 'self' has gone out of fashion for good reason. Each of us in each instant is constructed by the multiple relationships in which we are engaged. In the way of thinking which underlies the person-centred approach, it is the connections, the relationships, which make our interaction with our clients meaningful - personally and cosmically.

Rogers argued that empathy, acceptance and genuineness are both entirely necessary and entirely sufficient for counselling to be effective. I'm not as radical as Rogers, and I hesitate to be as absolute as that. Certainly, disability support workers and managers need to be good at more than relationships to be effective in their work. Nevertheless, helping, of whatever kind, is something which ultimately takes place person to person, and ultimately depends on relationship.

Teachers who think that children are basically nasty, lazy and selfish and needing to be controlled, treat them accordingly and invariably have their belief confirmed. Teachers who believe that children are basically good, creative and compassionate likewise find in their experience that this is true. I imagine the same is true for disability support workers.

For any genuinely person-centred helper, person-centredness is not about technique. Still less is it about customer satisfaction. It is a way of being.

The UK Interdependence Report by New Economics Foundation
Free download available from http://www.neweconomics.org

The UK Interdependence Report maps out the depth and breadth of our increasing interdependence and the price the planet pays. The report shows that at current levels of natural resource use in the UK, the average person has gone into ecological debt on 16 April. In a comprehensive overview of the UK's place in the international system the UK Interdependence report reveals how the nation is being woven into an ever closer and more complicated economic, cultural and social fabric, with both positive and negative consequences. Above all, the report raises huge questions about how radically the UK's patterns of interdependence will have to change if our economy and lifestyles are to become remotely sustainable. A positive future, it suggests, will only be guaranteed through a paradigm shift in government policy away from 'beggar-thy-neighbour' economic competitiveness, towards the cooperation demanded by our inescapable interdependence.

The New Economics Foundation
This organisation was founded in 1986 by the leaders of The Other Economic Summit (TOES) which forced issues such as international debt onto the agenda of the G7 and G8 summits. NEF aims to improve quality of life by promoting innovative solutions that challenge mainstream thinking on economic, environment and social issues. Partnerships are an integral part of how they work, partnerships that put people and the planet first. NEF integrates environmental sustainability and social justice in their work. This approach moves away from traditional methods that too often see environmental and social problems discussed separately.

A visit to their website www.neweconomics.org will open up a big window of information to the different strands of the organisation's work as well as its ethical stand. A glance at their current programmes makes for hopeful reading. In addition, the publications section offers almost all titles as free PDFs to download. Below we have highlighted the Local Works Campaign, one of their programmes, which the Centre for Creative Communities actively supports.

Local Works
Campaign for the Sustainable Communities Bill

Initiated by the New Economics Foundation, the campaign seeks to create healthy local communities which increase people's well-being and environmental sustainability. The Bill aims to give the power to local communities to determine their own agenda for environmental, political, social and economic sustainability. To sign up to support the campaign go to www.localworks.org or email Stephen Shaw, the campaign co-ordinator at steve@localworks.org