

Who is Paul T. P. Wong to Me?

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To understand who Dr. Paul T. P. Wong has been for me, it is necessary to know the context I was buried in when I contacted him for the first time. It was January 2017, and my professional situation was, so to speak, not the greatest. During the previous four years, I had devoted myself to learn the basics of behaviourism and its modern clinical and theoretical tendencies. I was a geek so fascinated by this approach that I imagined myself contributing to the development of this school: I finished my Master's, started a Ph.D. program in behaviourism, established connections with researchers in this area from different parts of the world, registered as a member of important behavioral associations, and worked hard to produce high quality research. Everything was oriented in my professional (and personal) life towards this community, so convinced was I that it was the biggest source of meaning in my life. But a few months before January, my critical perspective and strong personal differences with my fellows and supervisor led me to a huge heartbreak that made me disconnect abruptly from this community. Honestly speaking, I was disoriented, probably depressed. For the first time in my life, psychology turned from being a passion to producing repugnance. I was in the middle of a full-blown existential crisis.

During these months, I started to study cancer patients; I wanted to know how their personal values system changed after diagnosis of the illness. The pattern I observed in the majority of these people had to do with a shift towards valuing more personal relationships, family above all, as well as being more authentic and coherent with what they consider important. Those conversations with cancer patients encouraged me to pay more attention to my personal relationships and give less importance to work and success. But still, I did not have a psychological approach that covered this phenomenon I was experiencing. In describing this in terms of patterns of behavior and contingencies (although they can exist in its basis), the explanation of this phenomenon seemed to lose its essence and the message that these patients can convey to the rest of the world seemed to be lost in such reductionism.

And then, the book chapter titled “From Logotherapy to Meaning-Centered Therapy” by Dr. Paul T. P. Wong came into my hands. That was the first time I heard about Paul. I was fascinated by the openness of Paul towards different psychological approaches while he still seemed to maintain a connection to real human problems. My interest about learning Meaning-Centered Therapy’s applications to cancer patients made me contact Paul for the first time and to ask him for an internship in Toronto in his institute. I have to say that among the few professors I emailed, only Paul accepted my internship proposal—and, paradoxically, he was the person with the highest impact on psychology among them! I remember that I jumped for joy when I read his acceptance email. He even accepted me as a friend on Facebook! I was very excited about this adventure with Dr. Wong, but I never could have imagined how it actually was going to be.

Before flying to Canada, Paul proposed for me to be a coauthor in a book chapter and a book about palliative care. And that was only the beginning: I radically changed from being stuck in writing and reading to constantly doing it. I couldn’t believe that I was publishing with a prestigious professor—me, an unknown, isolated doctoral student from Spain.

My arrival to Toronto was amazing. The Wong couple received me with a dinner and lots of smiles. Based on my previous experience, recognized professors tend to be distant, sometimes a bit arrogant, and they don’t trust independent students at all. But in front of me there were two

people treating me with respect and warmth, they even posted photos of that dinner on social media. It was sincerely unbelievable.

My three months with Paul in Toronto were, I would say, “insuperable”. First, he trusted me to review a doctoral thesis from Australia on my very first weekend. Then, he let me help him in review tasks for top scientific journals in which I dreamed of publishing one day. I suddenly was on the other side of the wall. I did not know that I was capable of these things, but an 81-year-old man was demonstrating that this intensity of work can be normal, and, what is more, you can do it all with a smile.

The more I learned about how Paul had achieved all he had in life, the more fascinated I felt. Although his humility does not allow him to accept this, I must claim that he is a real genius, a person who has completely created himself. He is multifaceted, throughout his career, he has learned from almost all big approaches of psychology: behaviorism, cognitivism, humanism, and existentialism, among others. But because none of them satisfied him completely, he took the best he considered from each and created his own school. Is not that characteristic of a genius? Nowadays, Existential Positive Psychology is an umbrella that can give room for many different traditions in psychology and philosophy.

I will never forget his words: “a good scientist must be critical and creative, I don’t want you to be my follower, take whatever you consider important and develop it in your own way”. Many recognized scientists treat their theories as their “untouchable child”. And here we find another trait that makes him unique: his ability to integrate. Paul practices what he preaches. He has connected his philosophy and morals to his actions and experiences, which means an integration of head-heart-hands. His theory and therapy are the representation of his life story, a life with many obstacles from the very beginning, but a life that is worth living because of love and service for others, always in connection to an ultimate meaning. As a good Christian, he is able to embrace suffering with a smile, a smile that symbolises love.

Many people would agree with me that Paul is a model of humanity. Everybody loves him (at least those who can love). When you are speaking with him, you have the feeling that he is an open channel, someone whose main direction of energy is from the inside to the outside. At the last Meaning Conference in Vancouver, when I bumped into him in a hotel hallway, he was making jokes and shouting with someone like a child. I couldn’t stop laughing. He said to me “shamelessness is an important source of meaning, it is the absence of fear when you speak with others”.

A month ago, he visited Almeria (Spain) and I can say that people fell in love with him. I remember, after finishing a lecture, the students started to clap so long and so strong, which I have never seen before at my university. A few days later, he gave a conference speech and when he finished, after two hours of sitting, no one in the audience wanted to get up and leave the room. They wanted to stay with Paul, listen to him, shake his hands, and take pictures with him. That is charisma. Senior professors at my university told me that his visit has been something truly historical.

I would like to dedicate my final words to Paul by thanking him for choosing me as his apprentice, his colleague, and his friend. I can openly say that Paul has been the person who rescued me from a professional and personal crisis, the person who made me believe again that dreams can come true, who restored my faith in humanity. Words are not adequate to express my gratitude to you.