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## Carl R. Rogers (1902-1987): Friend, Gentleman, and Scholar

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### Abstract

This article is written in memory of Carl R. Rogers. An attempt is made to convey a sense of the spirit of Rogers' thinking and of the kind of person he was, both in his own eyes and in the experience of those who knew him personally. The article is concluded with a discussion of how Rogers' "way of being" has influenced the writer's own personal and professional development.

### Résumé

Cet article est écrit en mémoire de Carl R. Rogers. Une tentative est faite afin de communiquer un sens de l'esprit de la pensée de Rogers et du genre de personne qu'il était, aussi bien à ses yeux que par l'expérience de ceux qui l'ont connu personnellement. L'article est conclu par une discussion expliquant comment la "manière d'être" de Rogers a influencé le développement personnel et professionnel de l'écrivain.

As a boy I was rather sickly, and my parents have told me that it was predicted I would die young. This prediction has been proven completely wrong in one sense, but has come profoundly true in another sense. I think it is correct that I will never live to be old. So now I agree with the prediction. I believe that I will die *young*. (Rogers, 1980a, p. 16)

I was saddened to learn recently of the passing on of Carl Rogers. Those who knew Rogers, either personally or through his writing, will miss him as they would a close and dear friend.

In what follows, my purpose is not to chronicle in any systematic or exhaustive manner the life history and accomplishments of Carl Rogers. This has already been admirably well done by Rogers himself (see especially Rogers, 1961, 1973, 1974, 1980) and by others who have written about him (see especially Evans, 1975; Heppner, Rogers, and Lee, 1984; Kirschenbaum, 1979). Instead, I will attempt to convey, by relying on selected direct quotations from a variety of sources, a sense of the spirit of Rogers' thinking and of the kind of person he was, both in his own eyes and in the experience of some of those who knew him personally.

### *The Core of Carl Rogers' Life Project*

In 1972, Rogers was awarded the "Distinguished Professional Contribution Award" by the American Psychological Association. In a 1973 address acknowledging receipt of this award, he described his long and multi-faceted career as follows:

From 1927 to the present time I have been a practicing psychologist. I have made diagnostic studies of children and have developed recommendations for treatment of their problems; in 1928 I developed an inventory of the inner world of childhood which — may Heaven forgive me — is still being sold by the thousands. I have counseled with parents, students, and other adults; I have carried on intensive psychotherapy with troubled individuals — normal, neurotic, and psychotic; I have engaged in and sponsored research in psychotherapy and personality change; I have formulated a rigorous theory of therapy. I have had forty years of teaching experience, fostering learning through both cognitive and experiential channels. I have engaged in facilitating personal development through the intensive group experience; I have tried to make clear the processes of both individual therapy and the group experience through recordings, demonstrations, and films; I have tried to communicate my experience through what now seem to me to be countless writings, tapes, and cassettes. I have played my part as a worker in professional associations of psychologists; I have had a continuous, varied, controversial, and richly rewarding professional life. (Rogers, 1980b, p. 47)

Over the course of this varied career, Rogers maintained a steadfast fidelity to a few core beliefs about the nature of persons and the conditions and processes related to optimizing the actualization of human growth potential. In *On Becoming a Person*, (1961) Rogers attempted to explain the most fundamental of his assumptions about the nature of human nature.

There is one deep learning which is perhaps basic. . . . It has been forced upon me by more than twenty-five years of trying to be helpful to individuals in personal distress. It is simply this. *It has been my experience that persons have a basically positive direction.* In my deepest contacts with individuals in therapy, even those whose troubles are most disturbing, whose behavior has been most anti-social, whose feelings seem most abnormal, I find this to be true. When I can sensitively understand the feelings which they are expressing, when I am able to accept them as separate persons in their own right, then I find that they tend to move in certain directions. And what are these directions in which they tend to move? The words which I believe are most truly descriptive are words such as positive, constructive, moving toward self-actualization, growing toward maturity, growing toward socialization. I have come to feel that the more fully the individual is understood and accepted, the more he tends to drop the false fronts with which he has been meeting life, and the more he tends to move in a direction which is forward. (pp. 26-27)

Rogers devoted his life to identifying and understanding the qualities of being and the interpersonal conditions related to providing an optimally free rein to this essentially positive human “formative tendency.” These qualities and conditions constituted the framework for what Rogers referred to as the “client-centered,” or “person-centered,” approach, which he most recently (Rogers, 1986) had described as follows:

The person-centered approach, then, is primarily a way of being which finds its expression in attitudes and behaviors that create a growth-promoting climate. It is a basic philosophy rather than simply a technique or a method. When this

philosophy is lived, it helps the person to expand the development of his or her own capacities. When it is lived, it also stimulates constructive change in others. It empowers the individual, and when this personal power is sensed, experience shows that it tends to be used for personal and social transformation. . . . When this person-centered way of being is lived in psychotherapy, it leads to a process of self-exploration and self-discovery in the client, and eventually to constructive changes in personality and behavior. As the therapist lives these conditions in the relationship, he or she becomes a companion to the client in this journey toward the core of self. (p. 199)

Reflecting his inclination to explaining human growth processes through the use of metaphorical language, Rogers (1980b) described the therapeutic conditions central to this person-centered approach as follows:

And then I garden. Those mornings when I cannot find time to inspect my flowers, water the young shoots I am propagating, pull a few weeds, spray some destructive insects, and pour just the proper fertilizer on some budding plants, I feel cheated. My garden supplies the same intriguing question I have been trying to meet in all my professional life: What are the effective conditions for growth? But in my garden, though the frustrations are just as immediate, the results, whether success or failure, are more quickly evident. And when, through patient, intelligent, and understanding care I have provided the conditions that result in the production of a rare or glorious bloom, I feel the same kind of satisfaction that I have felt in the facilitation of growth in a person or in a group of persons. (p. 68)

Rogers considered the human equivalent to a fully blossoming flower to be the “fully functioning person.” In *Freedom to Learn*, he tried to be very explicit about the outcome of an optimal therapeutic, or personal growth, experience.

It appears that the person who emerges from a theoretically optimal experience of personal growth, whether through client-centered therapy or some other experience of learning and development, is then a fully functioning person. He is able to live fully in and with each and all of his feelings and reactions. He is making use of all his organic equipment to sense, as accurately as possible, the existential situation within and without. He is using all of the data his nervous system can thus supply, using it in awareness, but recognizing that his total organism may be, and often is, wiser than his awareness. He is able to permit his total organism to function in all its complexity in selecting, from the multitude of possibilities, that behavior which in this moment of time will be most generally and genuinely satisfying. He is able to trust his organism in this functioning, not because it is infallible, but because he can be fully open to the consequences of each of his actions and correct them if they prove to be less than satisfying. . . . He is able to experience all of his feelings, and is afraid of none of his feelings; he is his own sifter of evidence, but is open to evidence from all sources; he is completely engaged in the process of being and becoming himself, and thus discovers that he is soundly and realistically social; he lives completely in this moment, but learns that this is the soundest living for all time. He is a fully functioning organism, and because of the awareness of himself which flows freely in and through his experiences, he is a fully functioning person. (Rogers, 1969, p. 288)

### *Carl Rogers as a Person*

In my estimation, two of Rogers' most endearing and profoundly influential personal qualities were his relentless determination to explore and to understand his own life experience and his uncommon willingness to transparently share his meaning-making efforts with others. Indeed, Rogers has revealed a great deal about the kind of person he was by way of numerous self-disclosures that he has made in his writing over the years. A relatively early indication of Rogers' willingness to let himself be rather fully known to his readers was provided in the Preface to his classic work, *Client-Centered Therapy*:

This book is about the suffering and the hope, the anxiety and the satisfaction, with which each therapist's counseling room is filled. It is about the uniqueness of the relationship each therapist forms with each client, and equally about the common elements which we discover in all these relationships. This book is about the highly personal experiences of each one of us. It is about a client in my office who sits there by the corner of the desk, struggling to be himself, yet deathly afraid of being himself—striving to see his experience as it is, wanting to *be* that experience, and yet deeply fearful of the prospect. This book is about me, as I sit there with that client, facing him, participating in that struggle as deeply and sensitively as I am able. It is about me as I try to perceive his experience, and the meaning and the feeling and the taste and the flavor that it has for him. It is about me as I bemoan my very human fallibility in understanding that client, and the occasional failures to see life as it appears to him, failures which fall like heavy objects across the intricate, delicate web of growth which is taking place. It is about me as I rejoice at the privilege of being a midwife to a new personality—as I stand by with awe at the emergence of a self, a person, as I see a birth process in which I have had an important and facilitating part. It is about both the client and me as we regard with wonder the potent and orderly forces which are evident in this whole experience, forces which seem deeply rooted in the universe as a whole. The book is, I believe, about life, as life vividly reveals itself in the therapeutic process—with its blind power and its tremendous capacity for destruction, but with its overbalancing thrust toward growth, if the opportunity for growth is provided. (Rogers, 1951, pp. x-xi)

Rogers was acutely aware of the conditions under which his own personhood tended to blossom. As he reveals in a refreshingly candid manner in *A Way of Being*:

Another learning I would like to mention briefly is one of which I am not proud but which seems to be a fact. When I am not prized and appreciated, I not only *feel* very much diminished, but my behavior is actually affected by my feelings. When I am prized, I blossom and expand, I am an interesting individual. In a hostile or unappreciative group, I am just not much of anything. People wonder, with very good reason, how did he ever get a reputation? I wish I had the strength to be more similar in both kinds of groups, but actually the person I am in a warm and interested group is different from the person I am in a hostile or cold group. (Rogers, 1980b, p. 23)

Rogers has consistently maintained that authenticity, or genuineness, on the part of the helper is a most fundamental ingredient in a constructive counselling relationship. He also strongly believed in the

tacit importance of personal honesty and genuineness in non-therapeutic relationships and situations. As he explained in *Freedom to Learn*:

I am disappointed when I realize — and of course this realization always comes afterward, after a lag of time — that I have been too frightened or too threatened to let myself get close to what I am experiencing and that consequently I have not been genuine or congruent. There immediately comes to mind an instance which is somewhat painful to reveal. Some years ago I was invited to spend a year as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California. The Fellows are a group chosen because they are supposedly brilliant and well-informed scholars. It is doubtless inevitable that there is a considerable amount of one-upmanship, of showing off one's knowledge and achievements. It seems important for each Fellow to impress the others, to be a little more assured, to be a little more knowledgeable than he really is. I found myself several times doing this same thing — playing a role of greater certainty and of greater competence than I really felt. I can't tell you how disgusted with myself I was as I realized what I was doing. I was not being me; I was playing a part. (Rogers, 1969, p. 230)

The quality of Rogers' personhood is also made evident by the accounts and recollections of those who have had direct contact with him in a variety of contexts. Over the years, Rogers has had a consistently powerful growth enhancing effect upon others by virtue of his capacity for establishing and nurturing interpersonal relationships characterized by mutual trust and respect. In a biography entitled *On Becoming Carl Rogers*, Kirschenbaum (1979) quotes the following comments made by Father Charles Curran about the nature and quality of Rogers' rapport with graduate students in his early years as a Professor at Ohio State University:

He seemed to permeate the atmosphere around him with a genuine respect for graduate students as mature adults, equal to himself. He never assumed any prerogative of professional condescension or professorial eminence; yet at no time did he lose any position of dignity or authority. There always was about him a quiet dignity. And when he needed to assert his authority as a professor of a class or in the graduate school, he certainly seemed to me to do it with directness and unequivocal responsibility. At no point, however, did this clear image of himself assume tones of condescension or any indignity for the graduate student. (pp. 139-40)

Very recently, in an article entitled "Reflections on a Workshop with Carl Rogers," Sylvia Slack (1985) described her experience with him as follows:

Dr. Rogers's presence was not overpowering. Given his experience and importance, this seemed unusual to me. I sensed more of my own presence than his. That experience allowed me to see even better what client-centered therapy really is. The therapist's presence remains secondary, while the client's presence is primary. It is not merely a matter of who is speaking the most. Dr. Rogers must be aware of his own level of growth, but he was careful not to exhibit any expectation of trying to pull me into the same plane that he occupies. I feel sure that I could have sensed a desire to change me. I am very sensitive to how others feel about me. (p. 41)

Barry Stevens (1967), in *Person to Person: The Problem of Being Human*, poignantly conveys a sense of the kind of person Rogers was and of the liberating effect that he had upon his “clients” and upon those who knew him. As a result of listening to a taped counselling session in which Rogers had tried to help a man “who thought he was ‘no good,’ and because of this he wished he were dead,” she wrote the following reflections:

All of me was alive with movement, with sadness and joy intermingling without conflict—sadness that *anyone* should feel so utterly “no good,” that fellow humans should have made him feel this way, and joy for the release of his sobbing, and for the person of Carl who released this, through his own humanness. I was feeling very human myself, and wanting nothing to interfere with that. I wanted to live with it awhile. I couldn’t listen to another tape, and wanted to go home without having to talk to people superficially, which is to say unhumanly, on the way. I started to go quickly. And then I noticed a light coming through Carl’s office door. It showed on the hall carpet. I was moved to go to him—my body moved a little in that direction. But then the *I* which is *not I* thought, “No, don’t. He’s a busy man. You can tell him some other time.” But *I* came through with the knowing that no other time would be the same. It couldn’t. If I told him later, I would be trying to recapture something, to make a copy of it, reproduce it, when it was the living *now* that he had produced in me which I wished to share with him. I erased the conventional “do not disturb” thought from my mind. That’s all. When I did that, what had been checked for a moment moved, and I moved toward his door without thought or intention—both of them had disappeared when I erased the admonition “don’t.” . . . Carl was sitting at his desk, wearing a white cotton shirt. I told him I had heard the tape. I tried to “think of something to say” but I couldn’t. Words wouldn’t come into my head. My vocal cords felt stuck together. But then something said itself—“It’s beautiful!” His face expressed happiness, but I still felt “unsaid,” that I hadn’t altogether conveyed me. But no more words would come. I wished to touch him, to communicate in this way. A wispy thought came saying “No.” (“One doesn’t do that.”) When I erased the thought, my hand moved out and touched his shoulder. His response to me was as clear as my response to him— to both of us—although all he said was “Thank you” and all that I did was leave. (p. 132)

In my own experience, there remains a decided tendency on the part of those who are not too intimately familiar with Rogers and his life work to regard him as a rather passive, permissive, indecisive, and weak-willed individual. This perception is certainly most unfortunate and distorted. Counteracting this false impression of the kind of person that Rogers was, Norman Brice in *On Becoming Carl Rogers*, is quoted as having said:

What has bothered me so through the years has been the misguided notions of some who have read bits and pieces of what he has to say. They so often regard Carl as a softie, a ‘gentle Jesus’ type of person, permissive to a fault and therefore weak and ineffectual. In contrast to this, I have never in all my life met such a strong man as Carl. He puts *first* in his writings about psychotherapy the concept of *congruence* and that means *being yourself*. Being yourself means that you express anger when you feel it or boredom when you feel it, and that you are an authentic person in your own right. So many people don’t seem to get that

message. Someone, somewhere who does understand Carl said of him that he has a 'whim of steel.' Carl is nobody's pushover. He is a very, very strong and controversial man. (Kirschenbaum, 1979, pp. 185-86)

Rogers' personal qualities and exceptional therapeutic powers were widely appreciated among his colleagues in the social sciences and the helping professions. In a recent interview (see Meinecke, 1987), Jerome Frank described Rogers (along with Milton Erickson) as a "born therapist healer." According to Frank:

Most of us have some healing ability, but the born healers are people like Milton Erickson who have an uncanny ability to see what people need and give it to them. Maybe it's healing energy. Carl Rogers is another one. When I met him, I felt there was something coming out of this guy that's healing. He had an audience of 500 people here at Hopkins eating out of his hand in 5 minutes without doing anything special that I could see. . . . It has to do with that upper level of consciousness, I think. Those of us who are earthbound can do an awful lot just by listening carefully and watching, but there's something beyond that in some people. It's the ability to sense what the person needs without being able to define precisely how it is done. It may all be in the realm of great sensitivity to nonverbal communications. (p. 230)

### *Some Personal Reflections*

I was first introduced to Carl Rogers through his writing during the late 1960's. I was a graduate student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta, and to this day, I can vividly recall an immediate attraction to both the substance and the style of Rogers' works. It did not take long to develop the distinct feeling that I had become friends with someone whom I might well never actually meet in the flesh. At that time, a book by Rogers and Barry Stevens, entitled *Person to Person: The Problem of Being Human*, was particularly appealing to me. It served as a source of perspective, direction, and personal affirmation at a point in my graduate student career where I often felt confused, intimidated, and rather unsure of myself as a scholar and as a person preparing to be a counsellor. Reading Rogers' books during this personally and professionally formative period in my life helped me greatly in maintaining a strong belief in the importance of being true to oneself, remaining open to the broad spectrum of life experiences as they unfold, and being prepared to transcend, or forego, social impression-management and institutional game-playing when such activities violate one's sense of personal integrity.

I recall that in the initial phases of my counsellor training, Rogers' ideas relative to the core conditions of empathy, genuineness, and positive regard provided an inviting and meaningful point of departure in the direction of exploring the complex processes involved in trying to facilitate the growth of another individual. Since those early graduate school days, I have been repeatedly reminded, however, that Rogers' person-centred orientation is much more than merely, or simply, a

point of departure to supposedly more advanced, more specialized, and more complex counselling approaches and techniques. Each time that I re-view Rogers in action in the film series, *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*, I learn a little more about those aspects of his “way of being” that are probably elemental to all counselling approaches and to all phases of the helping process.

As is made amply evident in his book, *Freedom to Learn*, Rogers has devoted much of his time and energy to exploring the implications of his insights regarding a constructive therapeutic relationship for the field of education. In fact, he has, by his own example, demonstrated that “schools can grow persons” and that it is possible for educators to establish an interpersonal climate in schools and in classrooms which contributes to the development of the whole person. Over the years of my own work as a teacher, a counsellor, and a university professor, I have had affirmed in personal experience many of Rogers’ claims about the nature and outcomes of a person-centred approach to teaching and learning. Whenever I feel anxious about continuing to negotiate the often uneasy and slippery transition from being a dispenser of knowledge to being a facilitator of learning and human development, I seem to derive inspiration and renewed determination from reacquainting myself with Rogers’ writing on this topic.

I have, in recent years, become increasingly convinced of the need in the area of counselling to develop research approaches and methodologies that are finely attuned to lived human experience and that result in knowledge that is meaningful and useful to individuals involved in the actual practice of counselling on a day-to-day basis. As a result of doing the background work for some writing that I have recently done relative to this matter, I discovered that Rogers has had a keen interest in “human science” and “qualitative research” since the earliest years of his long career. In fact, his strong and abiding commitment to developing a “science of the person” spans a time frame of at least four decades! In 1945, he published an article in the *American Journal of Sociology* entitled “The non-directive technique as a method for social science” and, as recently as 1985, he published an article in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* entitled “Toward a more human science of the person.” Those of us who have relatively recently awakened to the need to remain optimally close to actual human experience when we carry out research owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Rogers for his pioneering efforts at humanizing the research process. Thanks in good measure to his foresight and determination, those presently pointing to the need for methodological appropriateness and methodological pluralism in counselling research no longer need to feel like voices crying in the social science wilderness.

In September of 1985, I decided that it was high time that I write to Carl Rogers to let him know how his thinking had stimulated my work



and how his “way of being” had decisively influenced my own personal development over the course of the past twenty or so years. I was experiencing a sense of urgency about writing to him because I was well aware that he was in his mid-eighties and, despite any wishes that I and others might have to the contrary, he was not going to live forever. I experienced considerable difficulty and frustration in trying to begin the letter. How should I “address” a person whom I felt I knew well but had never met? Finally, in what retrospectively seems like an embarrassingly fumbling manner, I wrote the following:

Dear Carl:

I was going to begin this letter in a more formal way by addressing you as Dr. Rogers. The more I thought about such an opening, however, the less genuine I came to feel since, from my point of view, we have been “friends” for years. Your writings have been an important, formative influence in my life and at times when I wonder what life is all about, I find myself gravitating into your company.

Near the end of the letter, I indicated to Rogers my continuing interest in his work and his recent thinking regarding the transcendent dimension of therapy and education. I concluded the letter by saying, “I hope that you continue to prosper. Thank you for being who you are and take care.” Although Carl Rogers has passed on since this was written, I am convinced that he is, indeed, continuing to prosper in those whose lives he touched while fully living his own.

I would like to conclude this remembrance with a few poems by Lao-Tse which, in Rogers’ own estimation, captured something of the spirit of his philosophy of life. These poems were selected for inclusion in Rogers’ (1973) article, “My philosophy of interpersonal relationships and how it grew.”

If I keep from meddling with people, they take care of themselves,  
 If I keep from commanding people, they behave themselves,  
 If I keep from preaching at people, they improve themselves,  
 If I keep from imposing on people, they become themselves.

It is as though he listened  
 and such listening as his enfolds us in a silence  
 in which at last we begin to hear  
 what we are meant to be.

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