Carl Rogers: Giving People Permission to Be Themselves

It was not a typical session, the symposium at the American Psychological Association convention in San Francisco, one of four arranged to honor psychologist Carl Rogers on his 75th birthday. About 800 people jammed the hall as people are wont to do wherever Rogers speaks. The half-dozen symposium participants, including Rogers and his psychotherapist daughter Natalie, brought their chairs down from behind the table on the stage and placed them on the floor before the audience.

They then announced that they were not going to give any of the papers they had prepared. Instead, they talked about what they were doing and thinking. Natalie talked about a recent "person-centered" workshop; Rogers' colleague Bill Coulson described how in 1962, when working on a doctorate in philosophy, he came across a book by Rogers, said "to hell with philosophy. I want to become a psychologist," plucked up his wife and five children, and followed Rogers to Wisconsin.

Then, as at a Quaker meeting, audience members rose one by one to say what they felt about Rogers. The praise reached such a pitch that it culminated in a standing ovation, followed by a singing of "Happy Birthday." Then things sort of ended, even though there were 20 minutes left on the program.

It was all very Rogerian, just the way the man, a towering figure in developments in psychology and theories of education over the past generation, thinks things should happen. Rogers believes in communities, not conventions—and not institutions, which to him are frozen ideas, to be avoided in his system of thought in which process is all, and change and growth the only constants.

At 75, Rogers is one of the grand old men of American psychology and a leading figure in the postwar development of humanistic psychology. He is generally regarded as occupying the other end of the theoretical spectrum from behaviorism, whose unquestioned leader is B. F. Skinner.

Known as a teacher, therapist, and researcher, Rogers nonetheless considers himself somewhat anathema to academic psychologists, because his values are antithetical to the caste systems and intellectual snobbery that he sees pervading higher education.

His ideas are so deceptively simple that it is only when they are carried to their logical extremes that their radical nature is perceived. Rogers believes, for example, that individuals, when given the opportunity, can figure out what is best for them. That may sound reasonable, but when it means decentralizing a school system, eliminating labels and hierarchies, and allowing students to choose or even make up their own courses of study and participate in their own evaluation, it begins to look a bit more controversial.

All Rogers' theories flow from one assumption: that people are basically good. Like plants, their natural tendency is to grow and express their potential. This means that no feelings are intrinsically destructive—that those which appear so reflect externally imposed distortions, like the contortions of a plant trying to grow under a brick.

These assumptions have led to a theory or therapy far more flexible than that of Freud, whose analytical therapy dominated the scene when Rogers came on it. Freud saw the psyche as a battleground of conflicting drives, including infantile and aggressive ones that needed to be sublimated for a maturely functioning ego. Analysis digs into the past, and assumes repressed urges must be understood before a patient can get well.

Rogers, by contrast, traffics heavily with feelings. Therapy is present-oriented, or "existential": labels and diagnoses are irrelevant. If anyone is the "analyst" it is the client, because only the client possesses the wisdom for his or her own growth.

Humanists and behaviorists alike have contributed to the demystification of therapy by characterizing it essentially as a learning experience, and thus putting it on a continuum with education rather than with medicine. But the techniques used by the two schools of thought are very different. Says Skinner, "Rogers wants to change things inside people, and I want to change the world in which people live." While Rogers considers behaviorism a very useful tool but not the whole answer, Skinner feels *his* theory is the all-embracing one. "People don't act because of states they feel: they act from conditions that produce those states," he says.

In practice, this means a behavioral therapist would concentrate on getting a patient to change his behavior, on the assumption that the subsequent reinforcement will lead to permanent positive changes, whereas a Rogerian therapist would concentrate on supplying an empathetic environment in which the client is free to express his feelings, on the assumption that increased self-acceptance and self-knowledge will lead the patient to change his own behavior.

Rogers believes, in education as well as therapy, that no one can "teach" anyone else anything worthwhile, that real learning (experiential rather than just cognitive) is self-initiated. Therefore, the job of the "facilitator" (a word he prefers over "therapist" or "teacher") is to supply an environment conducive to learning.

Although behaviorism is based on extensive research, humanism's claims are not so scientific. Rogers sees himself as a scientist who has formulated what he calls a "rigorous theory" of the conditions necessary for human growth. He is a pioneer in research on the process of psychotherapy, having been one of the first to transcribe recordings of psychotherapeutic interviews for the purpose of dissecting and evaluating them for their growth-producing elements. He is thus one of the first to dare step into the murky world of subjective feelings, and to claim that "just as we know the conditions for physical growth, it seems to me we can arrive at the same kind of specificity on personal growth." In therapy, he has identified three such conditions: the ability to listen, authenticity, and "unconditional positive regard." By the first, he means empathic listening—the ability to get inside the world of the client and see things as they look to him. By authenticity, he means that the facilitator must relate to the client as a "person," not a professional, and allow himself to become involved with his feelings as well as his intellect. Positive regard means that the facilitator is "nonjudgmental" and lets the client know that he is accepted—the only way for the client to begin to accept himself.

This simple formula has been arrived at through painstaking research—one study, for example, showed that no matter what school of thought therapists adhered to, their clients' progress was best correlated with the degree of acceptance, openness, and empathy they displayed.

For someone whose life has been devoted to communication, Rogers is remarkably reserved in person. A self-described "loner" not much given to small talk, he has a gentle thoughtful personality that also carries streaks of stubbornness and austerity that can be traced back to his roots. He grew up in a fundamentalist midwestern household where such things as feelings were not much discussed. "My mother didn't know anything that scrubbing a few floors wouldn't help."

The big jump onto his own inner track occurred when, as a student majoring in agriculture at the University of Wisconsin, he took a 6-month trip to China with a religious group. On his return he entered Union Theological Seminary in New York, but there he found confirmation of his growing doubts about the ability of religion to meet his needs—for "communication," which he has described as the driving force of his work, for helping others, and for freedom from dogma. So he moved over to Columbia Teachers College to become a psychologist, to the relief of his wife Helen, an artist who was not at all sure she wanted to be married to a minister. (It is worth noting that many of Rogers' generation, including psychoanalyst Rollo May, have abandoned the ministry for psychotherapy.)

Rogers' early jobs included heading the Rochester Child Guidance Clinic and, later, the Counseling Center at the University of Chicago. The center was one of the early attempts to provide psychological services in a university setting, and Rogers promptly ran into trouble with psychiatrists there who tried to shut down the center, claiming he was "practicing medicine without a license." Rogers has cited the resolution of this situation as an example of his "stealthy" mode of operation. "They said psychologists can't do psychotherapy. Very well." Instead of provoking open combat, "we'll do counseling."

In 1957 he moved to the University of Wisconsin, where his personal dissatisfaction with the nature of graduate education came to a head. In 1964, the year before he left, he wrote what he entitled "a passionate statement" on graduate education in psychology, in which he criticized a long list of assumptions that he felt were doing outright "damage" to students in graduate training: the assumption, for example, that they could not be trusted to pursue their own learning; that teaching meant showering incontrovertible "facts" on the heads of students, who were treated as "passive objects"; that they were supposed to "learn by being threatened, time after time, with catastrophic failure."

Rogers submitted the paper to APA's journal *American Psychologist*, but it was turned down as too controversial. It did not appear in print until Rogers' book *Freedom to Learn* came out in 1969, but it was widely circulated in unpublished form. It carried the message, which Rogers still believes pertains, that higher education is a conservative bastion filled with defensive people who resist sharing their power with students, hide behind status to avoid revealing their fallibility, and put too high a premium on cognitive learning and devalue subjective knowledge.

Thirteen years ago Rogers moved to California and away from being a full-time academic. Initially associated with the Western Institute for Behavioral Sciences, he and a group of kindred souls came to feel there was too much institute and not enough action. So, after some agonizing, they broke off and established the entity with which his name

The Empathic Computer

Rogers' therapeutic approach, when reduced to bare technique, is so simple that people make jokes about it. Part of being empathic is attempting to reflect a person's feelings back to him as accurately as possible, as in:

Client: I feel the whole world is against me.

Therapist: (sympathetically) You feel the whole world is against you.

A decade or so ago, Joseph Weizenbaum of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology devised a computer program called ELIZA with which one could hold a conversation in English. He gave the computer a program, called DOCTOR, designed to permit it to play the role of a Rogerian therapist. In a book, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, he records the following exchange:

Men are all alike.
IN WHAT WAY
They're always bugging us about something or other.
CAN YOU THINK OF A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE
Well, my boyfriend made me come here.
YOUR BOYFRIEND MADE YOU COME HERE
He says I'm depressed much of the time.
I AM SORRY TO HEAR YOU ARE DEPRESSED
It's true. I am unhappy.
DO YOU THINK COMING HERE WILL HELP YOU NOT TO BE UNHAPPY
I need some help, that much seems certain.
WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO YOU IF YOU GOT SOME HELP
Perhaps I could learn to get along with my mother.
TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR FAMILY
My mother takes care of me.
WHO ELSE IN YOUR FAMILY TAKES CARE OF YOU
My father.
YOUR FATHER
You are like my father in some ways.
WHAT RESEMBLANCE DO YOU SEE
You are not very aggressive but I think you don't want me to notice that.
WHAT MAKE YOU THINK I AM NOT VERY AGGRESSIVE
You don't argue with me.
WHY DO YOU THINK I DON'T ARGUE WITH YOU
You are afraid of me.
DOES IT PLEASE YOU TO BELIEVE I AM AFRAID OF YOU
My father is afraid of everybody.
WHAT ELSE COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF YOUR FATHER
Bullies.
DOES THAT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE FACT THAT YOUR BOYFRIEND MADE YOU COME HERE

Weizenbaum reported that he was "startled to see how quickly and how very deeply people conversing with DOCTOR became emotionally involved with the computer and how unequivocally they anthropomorphized it." People did not want him to examine the conversations, "clear evidence that people were conversing with the computer as if it were a person who could be appropriately and usefully addressed in intimate terms."

Many lessons could be drawn from this, one of which is that even the *appearance* of empathy (combined, of course, with the computer's quite genuine nonjudgmentalism) can be extraordinarily powerful.—C.H.

is associated—the Center for the Studies of the Person (CSP) in La Jolla.

The CSP is nothing, more or less. "Carl said he thought every institution should self-destruct within 5 years," says Earl Burrows of CSP. So "this is a nonorganization." It is more like a club than anything else. It occupies a few rooms in a white stucco two-story office complex hugging a swimming pool and has one salaried employee. As a nonprofit corporation it has to have a director, so, says Burrows, the members—some 33 teachers, writers, consultants, and therapists—elect whoever they think will have the least time and inclination to exert any leadership. New members simply happen, by being associated with center projects.

The center is associated with various projects, of which the best known probably are the 12-year-old La Jolla Program—a 2-week summer program of encounter groups to which anyone may apply—and a project known as Human Dimensions in Medical Education. HDME, which has gotten an enthusiastic response from medical schools all over the country, is one of the first of a now growing body of programs and courses designed to put physicians in touch with the "human" and ethical aspects of caring for patients. Initiated 5 years ago, it is aimed at medical schools rather than practicing physicians because it was felt that the greatest impact could be achieved by catching doctors still in training. Since it is geared to people, as opposed to people playing particular professional roles, everyone relevant is invited—deans, faculty, students, nurses, and spouses. Usually about 50 attend these 4-day gatherings. They are divided into small groups with one facilitator each, which meet for 8 hours a day.

Hilliard Jason of the Association of American Medical Colleges, who has been involved in a number of the workshops, says participants are invariably baffled at first by the lack of structure, and wonder why no one is trying to tell them anything. But finally, after a day of trying to act like professionals, they start communicating. They discuss the stresses and hazards of their jobs; relationships with families and colleagues; the fear, held by many achievers, of being exposed as a fraud. Says Jason, "It's a new and, for some people, a mind-blowing experience."

Another "laboratory" example of Rogerian ideas at work is supplied by the "parent effectiveness training" program started 10 years ago by Tom Gordon, a close friend and former student of Rogers. According to his associate Mel Kieschnick, Gordon's work with disturbed children indicated to him that they all had basically the same problems of communication with their parents. So he developed an 8-week course for parents that is now conducted throughout the country. What it basically amounts to is that parents are counseled to listen to their children and treat them as equals. They are shown that "power" and "responsibility" are not synonymous, but that the latter can be exercised without wielding the former. Parents are told how to make their own feelings known in conflict situations, while at the same time being "nonblameful" toward their children. They are also told how to use a "consultancy" approach to headstrong offspring—that is, they offer their expertise and counsel, but leave the final decision on touchy matters such as dropping out of school or teen-age sex to the "client."

Will being Rogerian make all go well with the world? Some think not. Albert Ellis, the founder of "rational emotive therapy" and a leading theoretician in psychotherapy, dismisses the Rogers approach as nothing more than "Boy Scoutism." A Rogerian therapist can make people "feel better, but they get sicker," he says, because therapists do nothing more than create a false environment of security and acceptance that does not reflect the "real world." Ellis contends that people have to be told what to do, because even though they have the capacity for growth and love, they also "have a biological tendency to think crookedly and emote inappropriately." Ellis thinks Rogers' approach is innocuous at best; he has no time at all for Rogerian ideas about education. "Unless you have very good directive teaching, education is a waste of time. People almost always do the wrong thing."

Rogers' friends do not subscribe to this view of human nature. Nonetheless, many of them believe that he carries his optimism to naive extremes. His faith that diverse groups of people—even in highly flammable situations—can achieve understanding is well documented in the controlled environment of encounter groups and workshops. His latest book, *Carl Rogers on Personal Power*, describes such situations as meetings he facilitated in Northern Ireland, as well as racial confrontations in this country. But large-scale, "real world" examples of person-centeredness at work are hard to find. Nicholas Cummings, founder of the California School of Professional Psychology, says that although he admires Rogers greatly,

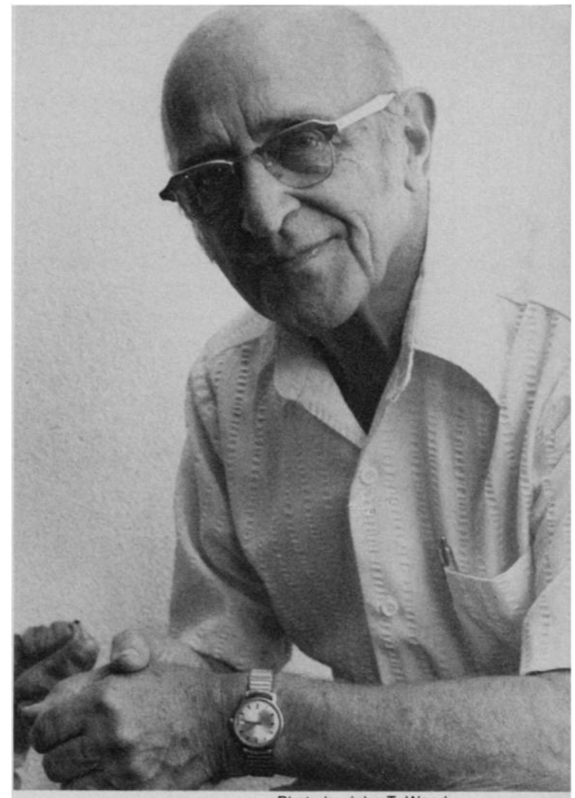
Photo by John T. Wood
Carl R. Rogers

one problem with his thinking is that "Carl has never discovered hostility—he doesn't know anger exists. He believes everything will ultimately resolve itself—unfortunately, it often doesn't."

Rogers might respond that the problem lies not so much with his assumptions but with the inadequacy of the methodology to implement them. He thinks psychology as a science continues to fail when it comes to exploring the most important issues.

He believes that, whereas physicists have moved into a relativistic paradigm, psychology and other social sciences are stuck in the same old Newtonian mold, pursuing the elusive goal of "objectivity" and trying to ape the methodology of the hard sciences while ignoring the equally valid world of subjective data.

Rogers says he has learned a lot from observing the work of theoretical physicists, the best of whom are not afraid of "wild subjective hypotheses and far-out ideas." But, he says, "research in psychology has not been vastly productive of new insights. Behavioral research is so popular because it is something neat and clear and specific we can measure and regulate and control. . . . Psychologists are a much more fearful group than other scientists—they tend to stick to the problems that can be resolved with rats." Future research, he says, "will have to be primarily phenomenological," incorporating a psychological Heisenberg principle, so to speak, which recognizes that what is perceived is shaped by the nature of the observer.

Rogers will leave these explorations to others. His preoccupation these days is with encounter groups in which other facilitators are trained and in which he feels he can have the most "impact."

In an interview with *Science*, Rogers said he is increasingly disinclined to associate himself with any organization or institution. "I feel a lot of institutions could fall apart and I wouldn't feel badly." There would be chaos, he acknowledges, but "also a lot of new and healthy things." For example, "It would be a marvelous thing for our high schools if compulsory education through high school years was abolished." If only those who wanted to learn had to go to school, that "would make education what it should be." Compulsory education "has run the course of its usefulness, and become a prison."

He has equally radical attitudes toward professional psychology. Not only does he have little faith in graduate education in the training of psychotherapists, he also has no faith in licensing and credentialing. "There are licensed incompetent psychologists and unlicensed incompetent psychologists," he says, proportionately just as many of the former as the latter. "The only answer I see," he says, "is people need to be educated as to what they ought to look for in therapy and not be guided solely by credentials."

Rogers, like many other people, thinks what is really wrong with psychotherapy is that "it's so expensive that it's primarily for the middle class. . . . The profession needs another whole direction." He thinks the only way to get help to the masses is to train lay people in empathy and listening skills. He is not so sure people can be trained to be "caring," but in his experience they can learn the other skills in a relatively short time. People could be trained in their communities and be available without charge. Although Rogers believes that his approach is effective with the seriously mentally ill as well as hard-core criminals, he acknowledges that because of manpower involved it would be extraordinarily costly. But problems could become more manageable if institutional environments were made more "therapeutic"—if ward personnel in mental hospitals, or any hospitals for that matter, were trained to listen.

What this amounts to is basically preventive (psychological) medicine. And where it should all start is in educational institutions. The ideas are there, and so is the knowledge about how to apply them. Why are they not more widely applied? "The fact that they're simple makes them very threatening," says Rogers. "The public's not ready."

But Rogers seems immune from disillusionment; on the contrary, his faith in the innately healthy strivings in human nature has steadily increased over the years.

He has been holding quite a few encounter groups to train facilitators in foreign countries in recent years, and he now thinks his popularity is greater in such diverse places as Germany, Japan, and Brazil than it is here. The reason may be that Rogers is now regarded as a conservative in the humanist movement, and his distaste for gimmickry makes him somewhat old hat in the U.S. where the movement has become increasingly antirational and fragmented into innumerable schools based on body therapies, mysticism, and so forth.

But in a country like Brazil, where CSP held giant training groups for facilitators last year, the political implications of Rogers' theories are keenly appreciated. (He has word, in fact, that his latest work will probably be banned in South Africa.)

Rogers' friends probably prize him most for—as they often put it—"giving people permission to be themselves." He has shown through his research that that's not only "okay" but it works; and through his life that, whatever his failings, it's okay to be Carl Rogers. Said the University of Santa Clara on giving him an honorary degree: "You have made it respectable to be human."

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Issue of Technology Transfer Is Snag for 1979 U.N. Meeting

The United States is perceived in the less developed countries (LDC's) as the major source and chief monopolist of science and technology. The LDC's are, therefore, understandably interested in U.S. policy for the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD) scheduled for 1979. After a year of preparation, U.S. policy is far from formulated and, internationally, the general state of organization for the conference might be diplomatically described as disarray.

In the United States a major sticking point has been the terms for transfer of technology. Most relevant science and technology here is controlled by private industry, and industry has formed a virtually united front to defend proprietary rights against what it sees as a grab attempt by the LDC's.

Also up in arms is the segment of the scientific community concerned with development problems. The worry is that the U.N. conference will concentrate on technology transfer to the exclusion of broader consideration of the role of science and technology in development. These fears have been reinforced by recent seemingly unequivocal statements by the secretary general for the meeting that technology transfer policies will be the focus of the conference. This situation has prompted a serious discussion within the International Council of Scientific Unions of sponsoring a separate meeting to consider the substantive uses of science in development. The ICSU meeting would be intended to complement the U.N. conference, but some other nongovernmental groups, displeased with the shape the meeting is taking are even talking of a "counter meeting."

Perhaps too much ado should not be made over a U.N. meeting, since world conferences often amount, in more than one sense, to wastes of words. But the issue of economic inequality between LDC's and industrial nations has given rise to a division in world politics that has begun to rival in sharpness the dominating conflict between capitalist and communist countries. The U.N. and its specialized agencies have been the main forum for this new debate, which, because the LDC's are concentrated in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the industrial countries in the Northern Hemisphere, has come to be called the "north-south dialogue." That dialogue has heavily influenced the terms of discussion in several U.N. meetings on global problems in this decade—on food, population, water and deserts, for example—and UNCSTD is regarded by