

# EXPRESS YOURSELF

by

Natalie Rogers

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The words "expressive therapy" or "expressive arts therapies" have been used to describe the nonverbal therapies: dance therapy, art therapy, and music therapy in particular. This term also includes therapy through writing, drama and improvisational theater.

My own definition has evolved over the years and includes the words "The Person-Centered Approach to Expressive Therapy" to distinguish my approach from the analytic school of psychotherapy and the arts.

In my work as an expressive therapist I combine movement, art, writing, music, guided fantasy, meditation, verbal and nonverbal communication skills to facilitate inner awareness, self expression and higher states of consciousness. I find this to be an integrative process using our intuitive abilities as well as our logical linear thought processes. We involve the mind, body, emotions and spirit.

Having my roots in the client-centered philosophy of my father, Carl Rogers, I emphasize the facilitator's role as being empathic, congruent, open and honest. Listening in depth facilitates the

growth of the individual or group. This philosophy incorporates the belief that each individual has worth, dignity and the capacity for **self direction**.

As I look into what other expressive therapists are doing and writing, I find that those of us evolving the person-centered approach to expressive therapy have something special to offer. Most college departments of expressive therapy offer separate courses in dance therapy, art therapy, journal writing and psychodrama. I am interested in **combining** the expressive modes to evolve a process for unleashing the creative potential within each individual. I am intrigued with what I call "the Creative Connection". That is the **connection** between movement, art, writing and sound. When we move with awareness it opens us to profound feelings which can then be expressed in colour, line or form. When we write immediately after movement or art work there is a free flow from the unconscious - sometimes poetry. When I discovered this process for myself, I wanted to expand it and create an environment where others could take an inner journey in this way.

I believe that we are all capable of being profoundly, beautifully creative, whether we use that creativity in relationships or painting or writing. The seeds of much of our creativity come from the unconscious and our feelings and intuition. The unconscious is our deep well. Most of us have put the lid on that well. Emotions are a **source** for our creativity; love, rage, fear, grief, joy, are all emotions that can be **channeled** into creative ventures - dance, music, art or writing.

Expressing oneself creatively is a growth process in and of itself. Although we may make attempts to "understand" our dance or picture, it is the intense involvement with the process which is integrative and healing. Or, as some participants put it: "It is much easier for me to deal with some heavy emotions through expressive play than through thinking/talking it through". Or another person said, "I discovered in exploring my feelings that I could break through inner barriers that I set for myself by moving/dancing the emotions. To draw that feeling after the movement continued the process of unfolding".

I believe we create to connect to our inner source and to reach out to the world and the universe.

Since the client-centered approach is my heritage and since that approach specifically allows the client to lead the way, it became a dilemma in my early professional years as to how I could lead people in structured exercises and also be person-centered. As a group psychotherapist I was experimenting

with the use of art and movement to help free people from their tight emotional boxes. As I gave instructions for moving or drawing there was a little voice going on inside of me saying, "You are not being a **client-centered** therapist because you are telling people what to do". I felt I was being a traitor to my father's philosophy. However, participants gave me feedback which encouraged me to continue.

The confusion in my mind stemmed from watching my father as a group facilitator. His usual approach in a personal growth group was to start by saying, "I'm Carl and I'm here to get to know you as deeply as I can and to let you know me". That was the extent of the structure. From there he followed the lead of the participants' verbalizations. This style, as I see it, is profound in that it immediately puts all of the responsibility for the direction of the group into the hands of each individual. Eventually they begin to understand that, "if I want something to happen, I have to make it happen". Some people learn to empower themselves quickly, some never take advantage of that opportunity.

Since I had learned a great deal for myself in such "non-structured" groups about empowering myself, it took me some time to realize that there are many ways to be a person-centered facilitator. Person-centered, in my mind, does not mean "non structure". In my opinion, Carl's "non-structure" is very definitely a structure with some predictable outcomes.

I believe it is important to understand the difference between one's leadership or facilitation **style** from one's psychological **value system**. Carl has a leadership style that embodies his philosophy, but it is also an outgrowth of his personality. I find that when I apply his philosophy to my groups, **my** personality will determine the structure. My values, philosophy, the way I **am** as a facilitator is person-centered in that I am accepting, congruent, empathic and coming from the heart. What I **do** is to offer people some movement, art and writing methods that give them a way of expressing themselves without words. I lead them in exercises in movement so that they have the "vocabulary" with which they can speak through their bodies. I guide them through experiences in art, fantasy and writing which enable them to explore their inner world. Then I respond to them in my person-centered way. I follow their lead; I enter their frame of reference. Being a group facilitator is an art form based on philosophy, not a methodology.

In Norway I developed, with Columbus Salvesen, a two-year training program for professionals who wished to expand their therapeutic skills to include expressive modes. We met four times for ten-day sessions. Participants experienced the methods they wanted to learn. Theoretical questions came out of our time together: Why is it that after we engage in authentic movement, art and poetry come without thought or plan? Why is it that those of us who are usually blocked in art media (from negative

childhood training) find ourselves creating dramatic, colourful pictures? What happens that "the dance danced me?" (the feeling that **I** didn't do it, the movement came **into** me).

We know that the process taps into our primitive self, our child self, and our shadow side as well as allowing our inner light to emerge. Metaphors seem to describe the process better than logical sentences:

*"We must plunge to the depth of the well to let the geyser push forth".  
"The onion gets peeled, layer by layer".  
"Here the soil is fertile and the seed planted, I watch myself slowly grow and come to full bloom".*

We know that after days of such inner exploration being expressed creatively in sound, art, writing, and play acting, that we are energized and full of vitality and hope. Why don't we use these processes **all of the time** in our daily lives: in board meetings, class rooms, in business and industry? One colleague told me "this stuff was being done in 1960 at NTL". My question is, where did it go? Why did it disappear in our lives? My only conclusion is that we are too chicken to take the risks to **use** it. It is hard to suggest (as I have, on occasion) in the middle of a serious meeting that we **move** and play for half an hour to suggest to a client that s/he try her feelings on paper with colour. It is easier and more acceptable to talk. It takes risk on our parts to suggest we use our nonverbal expressive modes.

This summer, to further explore the dimensions of the person centered

approach to expressive therapy we are offering a training program for professionals modeled after the Norwegian program. It will be a learning community to further explore the theory and therapeutic possibilities of expressive modes in a person-centered environment.

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### NOLI ME TANGERE

Do not touch me; I am not yet ready to be touched  
some things I must do first to guard against exposure.  
Your touching me might change me,  
might light the fuse would detonate my life;  
give me some time to shield myself against you  
and then you may come close.

You have come before, sliding under the closed door  
sealing the glass-topped wall into the garden:  
nothing I built was ever much use to defend me,  
looking back.

It is not about building,  
not about walls and fences and underground shelters.  
When the bomb blast strikes  
when grey ash sifts through the bones  
there is no defence in armoury;  
looking into the darkness, into the heart of pain,  
the flame burns pure.  
When you are seared through and through  
no doubt, the bones will strengthen.

Touch me now, I am ready to be touched  
an open doorway is its own security  
the fireball will pass through;  
in its wake, strangers may wander in  
exploring curiously -  
in its wake anything may happen.

**Ann Castling**

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