
CARL ROGERS, 1902 - 1987

Tony Merry writes:

On February 4th, 1987, Rogers died after suffering a fall at his home followed by a cardiac arrest. In the next few days, obituaries appeared in newspapers around the world, including the London Times and an unflattering one in The Daily Telegraph. On Saturday 30th May, a memorial celebration of Carl and his work was held in London. People came from many countries in Europe to attend. 'Self and Society', the 'European Journal of Humanistic Psychology' in its March/April edition, did not report or acknowledge in any way the death of one of the handful of founders of Humanistic Psychology, neither did it make any reference in its May/June edition. Unfortunately, an article I had written nine months previously did appear in the May/June edition (A Glimpse Behind the Curtain) in which I wrote, referring to a workshop to be held this July, "Carl Rogers intends to make a full commitment to the workshop, and the opportunity to meet and work with him again is one that I personally look forward to".

I am at a loss as to why 'Self and Society' chose to ignore the event of Carl Roger's death. Few people would disagree that over the last fifty years, Rogers made a contribution to the development of Humanistic Psychology second to none. In the UK, however, Roger's influence has, in my opinion, always been underestimated and undervalued when compared to his influence in the USA and the rest of Europe.

To mark Carl Roger's death, I offer the following personal appreciation.

To Carl

I first met Carl Rogers nearly twenty years ago,, like most people, through his books. His writings made a deep impression on me, though I was to do little with it for some years. Later, when I became committed to the ideals and principles of Humanistic Psychology in my life and work, I turned again to Rogers for inspiration. My second reading of his work made even more sense to me than first time round. Eventually, after trying out many different areas within Humanistic Psychology, all of which I learned from, I took a training programme in Client Centred Psychotherapy with the Person Centred Approach Institute founded by Carl Rogers, Chuck Devonshire and Alberto Zucconi, an Italian therapist and educator. This programme changed my life - from knowing about Humanistic Psychology to being a Humanistic Psychologist. Whilst on this programme, I met Carl Rogers in the flesh for the first time, the beginning of a short, sporadic, but for me profound association. (In fact, I worked with him only twice, once in Dublin for a week, and once in Hungary, also for a week).

I'd like to tell you this short story. I was a member of an Encounter Group where Carl was facilitator. The 'theme' of the group at the time was whether this whole personal growth/therapy business was doing anybody (that is, me) any good. I began to describe how my own understanding of the Person Centred Approach was becoming real for me, and I told the group about my three year old daughter, Kate.

It seemed that Kate had had some trouble at playgroup. She was doing some colouring in when the child next to her snatched away the crayons. This put Kate in something of a dilemma. She was prepared to share the crayons, but she had them first and wanted to finish her picture. She knew the other child was being unfair, but the situation was never resolved, ending in tears all round. I told the group that I had listened to this story from Kate, really listened. I can't remember my exact words, but I said something like, "*You really wanted to do that picture, so I guess you got cross with the other girl when she didn't share. It seems silly when things don't work out right, even when you try hard, doesn't it?*"

Listening to Kate, and trying my best to see the world through the eyes of a three year old child, helped her to feel taken seriously and understood. I had obviously hit the nail on the head, because she lit up like a Christmas tree, and told me everything that had happened to her throughout the whole day, almost without stopping. When she finished, she gave me a hug and went off to play with her brother.

In the group, I said to no-one in particular, "*One thing I really hope for. I would like to be able to listen to, accept and understand my children as best I can. If I can do this, maybe Kate won't have to spend hours in Encounter Groups when she is 35, trying to undo all the damage her father did to her*". This was partly a joke, but partly serious. I had made it into a joke because, at that time, I did not want to admit to myself my fears about being responsible for such young lives.

Carl said, "*It sounds to me as if she has her Encounter Group already*".

This simple response, the warmth of which is difficult to reflect off the printed page, spoken directly with care and humour was like a breath of fresh air. Carl showed me he understood something that I hardly understood myself. He had sensed the struggle going on in me. Supposing it turned out I really was a no good father? Supposing I didn't know how to love my children properly? In that moment I met with myself and began a whole process of acknowledging all the mixed up emotions that I, as a father, felt and lived with. In that moment, I loved my children as never before and began to trust myself with them. Such a fleeting moment, but it has, to this day, had the most profound effect on my life, and I think, on the lives of my two children, Kate and Dan.

Carl Rogers has been called a Guru, but only by people who never knew him. He was not a Guru, he never sought admiration from people, only respect and understanding. He won great respect for the enormous contributions he made to our **scientific** understanding of the psychology of the person, and he won this respect from the American Psychological establishment even though it was also suspicious of him. His books have influenced the preparation of therapists and counsellors more than any writings since Freud, and not only amongst the Humanistically oriented. His personal contributions to workshops and learning programmes throughout the world, including the Soviet Union, influenced and challenged hundreds, probably thousands, of professionals and lay people alike. His work in therapy, education, conflict resolution, social work, medicine and 'new paradigm research', are unparalleled and unprecedented. Carl's formulations of Client Centred Psychotherapy have inspired and stimulated enormous research and discussion. The Client Centred Approach has, for example, produced the only serious reappraisal from a Humanistic perspective of which I am aware, of the concept of Transference. (J. Shlien 'A Countertheory of Transference' in Client Centred Therapy and The Person Centred Approach. 1984. Praeger Press, eds. Levant and Shlien).

Client Centred Psychotherapy has proved effective with long term, hospitalised, so-called schizophrenics, (although research findings are not unequivocal, see, for example: Rogers C. Gendlin E. Kiesler, Truax C, 'The Therapeutic Relationship and its Impact: A Study of Psychotherapy with Schizophrenics. Univ. of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1967, or J.M. Shlien, 'A Client Centred Approach to Schizophrenia: First Approximations in Rogers C. and Stevens B. 'Person to Person' Real People Press 1967). It has made a major contribution to Education, supported by impressive research (see, Rogers C. 'Freedom to Learn for the Eighties', C. Merrill Pub. Co. 1983), to cross cultural communication, to all forms of community work, and is the most thoroughly researched and documented form of psychotherapy presently available.

Carl, I began this as a personal appreciation but I find myself reviewing your work instead. To me, you and your work are almost inseparable, but I am grateful that I knew you as a person as well. Along with millions of others, you influenced me in my life and work, you encouraged me to be myself by being yourself with me, you taught me the value of questioning the way I work and you helped me to gain the courage to be myself with my students, my clients, my children, my friends and myself. My life is richer ofr having known you, even a little, but what I did with your ideas I did myself. I think you would have enjoyed hearing me say that.

Editor's Note: *Unfortunately I/we missed the obituaries and the first we knew of Carl's death was someone ringing to ask about the memorial service.*