

## **CARL ROGERS IS DEAD**

One evening towards the end of February I was listening to the car radio while driving on the motorway. Reception was poor and I turned the tuner to find another channel. I caught a snippet of a familiar voice, that of Carl Rogers, and turned back to hear more. It was an announcement on RTE 1 (Eire) of a programme later that evening devoted to Carl's ideas on education. Only a couple of weeks earlier I had learned of Carl's death shortly after his eighty-fifth birthday. Hearing the broadcast from Ireland was my most recent encounter with the person who has been the most consistently influential on my thinking and my work since the early seventies. In those days, I knew him only from books and articles. Later when, in 1977, I attended my first Facilitator Development Institute workshop, I had eight days intensive experience of the encounter group mode which Carl Rogers pioneered. The effect on me was quite shattering and provided many new perspectives on myself which led to profound changes, both internal and external.

At a similar workshop the following year, Carl, making his first visit to Britain, was present in person. He was exactly the person one would expect from his writing: sensitive, modest and friendly, more given to listening than talking but strikingly clear and simple in expression when he did speak. My individual contact with him was very limited yet his powerful but gentle presence left an indelible impression. He loved to walk, and between sessions would be seen striding around, a slightly incongruous-looking figure wearing his California sun hat in rainy Cumbria. In the workshop he could be quite intense but he was also very good-humoured: no one laughed louder than Carl when a German participant teased him for, uncharacteristically, dozing off during a small group session. Later the same month I was present (with a couple of hundred others) at a rather odd meeting/discussion between Rogers and R.D. Laing held in the ballroom of the Hilton hotel in London. Though nervous, Carl seemed a model of composure and solidity beside the jerky and tense-seeming Laing. The event quickly turned into a mixture of a massive but very disorganised encounter group and an interview of Rogers by Laing. By afternoon Carl felt he was receiving too much of the attention at the gathering and gracefully withdrew to the periphery of the proceedings.

In 1982, the recently formed Spanish Association for Humanistic Psychology invited Carl to a workshop in Castelldefels, near Barcelona. The resulting 'Encuentros con Carl Rogers' was a very lively week-long

event buzzing with post-Franco energy and enthusiasm for social and humanistic psychological ideas long suppressed. I had rather more contact with Carl on this occasion since we were two of only a handful of English-speaking participants among more than a hundred Spaniards. I remember well many incidents from that week but one in particular comes to mind. One lunch time in the bar of the hotel, I was talking with a group of Spanish people when Carl joined us. He politely declined a young woman's offer to give up her seat to him, then, perched on the edge of a coffee table responded to her admission of feeling in awe of him with a really heartfelt confession of the shyness and lack of ease he too still felt in many situations. In a letter to her father after his death, Natalie Rogers refers movingly to this aspect of him. Citing a childhood experience, she notes, ' . . . you were shy; the way to know you was to work with you'. Later on at the Spanish workshop in a question and answer session, Carl was asked how he had been able to maintain his convictions about therapy and relationships over such a long time, often in the face of the indifference or even hostility of much of the academic establishment. 'Well', he replied after a longish pause, 'I do have a very stubborn streak'. Stubborn he may have been at times but his beliefs were held gently as well as firmly and he was never dogmatic in speech or writing. He seemed endlessly curious about the views of others and despite his failing eyesight, he continued to read very widely in his later years.

I saw Carl Rogers for the last time in Dublin in 1985. The workshop we were involved in was a large and difficult one with participants from seventeen countries. Cultural and religious tensions and conflicts frequently surfaced. I was impressed by Carl's concentration and his powers of endurance. Despite long hours of intense exchanges in the workshop, an address to the Irish Psychological Society and a TV interview, he also visited the theatre, talked individually with many participants and shopped in the local supermarket.

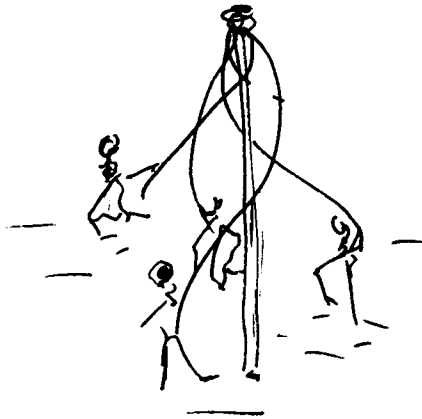
I am sad that I shall not have another face-to-face meeting with Carl but I am grateful for having known him albeit slightly. I believe that the congruence between Carl as a person and his writing greatly strengthens the depth of his influence on those who came into personal contact with him as well as knowing his ideas. I hope that the way of being this ordinary/extraordinary man exemplified may come to be recognised more and more as a way for us to maintain contact with or regain the real, genuine and essentially trustworthy human selves which, to our detriment, are often too well hidden behind our acquired social and occupational roles.

On Saturday 30th May a number of Carl Rogers' British friends and associates gathered at St. Marylebone Church in London to pay tribute to his life and work. The essence of the man as we knew him was conveyed

through readings from his own work interspersed with personal reminiscences from British, Belgian and German colleagues. The quiet, dignified simplicity of the occasion was entirely suitable but I imagine that Carl might have been a little embarrassed at being lauded so much. He liked to say that he was the spokesperson for ideas whose time had come. What he would have enjoyed was the warm, lively and loving way in which people came together in the foyer and on the church steps after the service. Here were gathered a variety of people whose common bond is a shared belief in and a desire to live out in their own lives the ways of being and relating of which Carl was a pre-eminent example as well as the principal proponent.

**Alan Coulson**

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