

Giving Life to Carl Rogers Theory of Creativity ©

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On January 8th, 2002, I lit a candle to honor my father's 100th birthday and give thanks to him for being a caring father, and to Helen for being a nurturing mother. As a therapist I know all too well that there are few children who grow up in such a loving, supportive, creative, and ethical environment. I carry the joys and burdens of such privilege. I enjoy the doors that have been opened to me professionally by being Carl's daughter, and carry some of the legacy of keeping his work alive in order to bring his humanistic values and methods to a world full of conflict and violence.

Two years ago I lit the fire to honor my father's centennial by putting the Carl Rogers Symposium 2002 on the calendar (July 24-28, 2002 in La Jolla, CA). Many others have also created ceremonies and conferences, journals and bibliographies to further his principles. I applaud all that we can do, collaboratively, to remind the world that the answer to conflict is not violence. The answer lies deep in the roots of the causes that bring individuals to such desperation that they rage and kill. For those of us who live in the privileged and often misguided United States, I hope the recent tragedies of September 11th will be a wake-up call that our government has had policies that have devastated whole cultures. The celebrations for Carl honor his concern over world events and his beginning attempts to use the person-centered approach with high-level government officials such as the Rust Peace Project (C. R. Rogers, 1986) and diversity groups such as his work with Ruth Sanford (Ruth Sanford's died recently Nov 2001) at age 94. I honor her work with Carl and her dedication to the person-centered approach and to furthering the work in diversity. in South Africa (Rogers and Sanford, 1987).

The Carl Rogers Symposium was truly inspiring. Our international diversity (350 people from 23 nations) electrified the group. This was a first because we included nine fields of endeavor as major themes: Psychotherapy, Education (Higher Ed., and K through 12) Organizational Transformation, Expressive Arts, Peace and Conflict Resolution, Health and Spiritual Life, Research, and Politics, Civic Engagement, and Diversity. A wide range of topics included: the person-centered approach in diversity training, a person-centered school in Los Angeles, recent developments in psychotherapy theory, person-centered sand tray therapy, and building for peace in Palestine and Israel. As humanistic psychologists, educators, peacemakers, spiritual guides, expressive artists, and researchers, we have a large web of people that, if working together, can manifest positive shifts in a troubled world.

My own focus has been to giving an active life to Carl's "Theory of Creativity" (C. R. Rogers, 1961, Ch. 19). In these times where conformity is being thrust upon us by governments, we urgently need strong individuals who are able to think and act creatively. Creativity threatens those who demand conformity. Dictators squelch self-expression and the creative process. They do not want their citizens to think for themselves or to be spontaneous, imaginative or self-determined. Thus, creativity is subversive to those who demand conformity to a political system. Carl was a very creative individual, himself. He personified the creative person who stays open to options, is flexible, and values individual differences. The conformist, on the other hand, is closed, rigid in his/her thinking, and follows the leader without using his/her self-knowledge or ability to discriminate. I believe that to maintain and foster democracy in our world we must be creative – that is, be able to play with ideas, see alternative solutions, and be able to listen empathetically to all sides. Carl was a master at this.

In Carl's remarkably brief but concise chapter on creativity he discusses the urgent social need for the creative process to be awakened, and the person-centered conditions under which it can blossom. He states the conditions for fostering constructive creativity: the first is psychological safety, which includes accepting the individual as one of unconditional worth, empathic understanding, and providing a climate of non-judgment. The second condition is a climate for psychological freedom (C. Rogers, 1954). To these two conditions, I have added a third; offering stimulating and challenging experiences (N. Rogers, 1993, p. 14). To explain what I mean by this, I need to backtrack, a bit.

My expressive arts work evolved when I moved from Boston to California and asked my Dad if I could work with him. He was delighted, of course. I quickly designed a ten-day intensive workshop. We asked six to eight other staff to join us and we then co-created what was called the Person-Centered Approach workshops. The staff included at various times; Carl Rogers, and Maria Bowen, Frances Fuchs, Maureen O'Hara, Joann Justyn, Jared Kass, Betty Meador, Alan Nelson, Natalie Rogers John K. Wood, Dick and Marion Vittitow. Because of Dad's appeal around the world, it was easy to get a huge crowd for ten days. These were international workshops during very experimental times. As staff we learned as much, or more, than the participants. Day after day the large group would sit talking about their lives, telling their personal stories full of emotional content – their tragedies, confusion, fear, and dilemmas. As staff, we were very good at reflecting their feelings and holding the safe space for these very personal moments. We also knew how to facilitate the confrontations people had with each other.

However, because I am such a kinesthetic person, I became very restless and thought, "How can we sit here for three hours in the morning, three hours in the afternoon and three hours in the evening?" So, I finally said, "I have a studio room with art materials, and anybody who would like to find other ways of delving into these personal issues can come and join me. We will experiment with non-verbal ways to talk about all the stories we are sharing, and we will use movement, art, sound and drama for self-exploration." I had several colleagues who were also interested in exploring this with me Jared Kass and Maria Bowen. We created playtimes that were deeply meaningful to people. We had very few guidelines. We just kept learning from what we were doing. The way to become a good facilitator is to constantly get evaluations and feedback from participants and ask, "What are we learning? What works and doesn't work?" We found that our ability to play, to use costumes, drama, and role playing as well as using art materials was very meaningful to people.

What I now call "the Creative Connection"(N. Rogers, 1993, p. 27-130) evolved. We discovered that using movement, visual art, sound and journal writing in sequence with very little verbalization helped us tap into our unconscious and our archetypal persona, bringing insight to our personal issues. As facilitators we suggested possibilities for these experiments, but in true person-centered fashion (C. R. Rogers, 1970, p. 43-59), we always checked this out with the individual involved. The client or the group member may choose to participate, or not, and we follow her lead. We created a safe, non-judgmental environment, giving people both stimulus and permission to take off their social masks to discover inner truths. After an hour or more of this engaging creative process, we talk about what we had learned through our art. This was the time for deep, empathic listening. We never interpret a person's art. I am as adamantly opposed to analytic art therapy as Carl was to analytic psychotherapy (Barton, 1974).

Experiments or experiences designed to involve the individual in the expressive arts give that person the opportunity to engage in the magic of the creative process and learn by doing (N. Rogers, 1993). This is where I feel my work has been an expansion of Carl's work. For a while I felt I was being a bit rebellious to take his work and actually create exercises that would stimulate people to use art and movement, sound and journal writing for self-expression. I had worked with my father for many years, and taken classes from him, and knew his philosophy and methods very well. I had incorporated them into my own way of being. So, to do something a little different was a difficult process for me at the beginning. Then I realized I was actually breathing life into his theory of creativity.

One further point: using the expressive arts gives people a safe place to explore their shadow side. In my book, *The Creative Connection* (1993), I spend one chapter talking about accepting the shadow, embracing the light. The shadow is the part we have repressed in our lives (Zweig 1991). Some people have denied their anger and rage for a lifetime. Others have hidden or denied their ability to love or be compassionate. Using movement, sound, color and drama offer opportunities to first become aware of one's shadow, and then to explore it fully through many media. Fear and grief are often more easily expressed in paintings or movement than in words. Rage can be splashed on large sheets of paper until some of the energy has been released and transformed. Such authentic self-expression if experienced in a compassionate, therapeutic environment helps the individual to release energy, gain insight, and take responsibility for his/her feelings and move toward constructive action. Ultimately this leads to improved self-esteem and an ability to give and receive love.

Most of us who knew Carl realize that he had difficulty acknowledging or expressing his anger in person. (He could do it in letter writing, occasionally). It should not surprise anyone, therefore, that I was eager to create a person-centered environment where people could delve into these feelings of rage or fear, or shame, in non-verbal as well as verbal forms.

With humankind in such a volatile state of rage, violence, loss, grief, and confusion, coupled with outpourings of generosity, compassion and love, I feel the place for person-centered expressive arts therapy is timely. It is timely for those of us who are capable of facilitating the healing of the grief, anger and pain and the sense of hopelessness. It is time for us to move into communities to help people find their sense of empowerment through the arts. The creative process is a life force energy. If offered in a safe, empathic, non-judgmental environment, it is a transformative process for constructive change.

It is Carl Rogers who has offered us the theory and methods in the person-centered approach that gives us the firm foundation on which to build. One of his greatest qualities was his ability to stay open to new ideas and learn from his own experience. In celebrating his life, I hope we will be inspired by his way of being.

References

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Resources

A new book, *Carl Rogers the Quiet Revolutionary an Oral History*, was released the week of the Symposium. This is Carl Rogers, in his own words, as interviewed by archivist David Russell. To order go to:

A CD-ROM, *Carl Rogers: A Daughter's Tribute*, was also released. The CD includes excerpts from each of Carl Rogers' books, his private letters and journals, and photos and videos from his life. To order go to the Website: <http://www.mindgardenmedia.com/cr.html>

The Symposium was recorded by Conference Recording Service. To order audio tapes (FAX: 510 527-8404) or go to the Symposium Website for papers, photos, and on-line continued discussion:

Natalie Rogers, Ph.D., is an author, artist, psychotherapist, and founder of the Person-Centered Expressive Therapy Institute. Her book, *The Creative Connection: Expressive Art as Healing*, joins person-centered theory and the expressive arts to facilitate deep inner work. She is the daughter of Carl Rogers.