

## **Dr Carl Rogers: 1902 – 1987**

Carl Rogers was born in Chicago in 1902, the 4<sup>th</sup> of 6 children (5 of whom were boys). Both his parents were college graduates who could trace their roots back in US history. His family was close, but marked by fundamentalist Christian beliefs resulting in no alcohol, no dancing or theatre visits, no card games – in fact little social life of any kind. The family was also permeated by the virtue of hard work.

Carl's health as a boy was not always good and he was perceived as prone to over-sensitivity. He sought refuge in books and was a lonely child. In 1914 the family moved to a farm and it was here that Carl learned about scientific methodology. He went on to study scientific agriculture at the University of Wisconsin. His ambition was to manage a farm in the most modern and scientific way.

At this time he joined a Sunday morning group of students lead by Professor George Humphrey. This was significant in that Humphrey encouraged the group to make its own decisions and refused to adopt a conventional leadership role. Rogers later described this as an excellent example of facilitative leadership. This group also provided a chance to make friends which was something he had not previously had much opportunity to do.

Rogers felt that he was called to become a Christian minister and changed from agriculture to history. At the same time he moved away from the fundamentalist beliefs of his family.

Carl was chosen to go to Peking to attend a World Student Christian Federation conference. The tour lasted 6 months and throughout he kept a diary and also wrote to Helen Elliott whom he had come to regard as his girlfriend. Amongst other things he came to recognise that it is possible for people to hold very different religious beliefs sincerely.

The trip enabled him to break free from the religious thinking of his parents and to achieve spiritual, emotional and intellectual independence – sharing his feelings in his letters home to his family who found this deeply distressing. However, it was during this time that he experienced the depth of group life, learnt to value individual differences, and received acceptance from the group whilst maintaining his own authenticity. The source of the famous core conditions is to be found in this period .

Rogers arrived home with a duodenal ulcer, and whilst recovering he registered for a correspondence course in introductory psychology. He became engaged and married to Helen and set off for Union Theological seminary in New York. He spent two years there, and despite the fact that Union was progressive in its approach to learning, he and others grew frustrated with the imposing of ideas and asked to set up their own seminar, for credit, with no instructors present, where the agenda consisted solely of their own questions. This was granted, with the proviso that one young instructor should observe, and the consequence for Rogers was that he

realised he could not stay in a profession where he would be *required* to believe in a specific religious doctrine.

At the same time he took a number of courses across the road at the neighbouring Teacher's College of Columbia. He followed a course in clinical psychology under Leta Stetter Hollingsworth, who, he remarked, combined the qualities of a warm human being with those of a competent research worker. Through her he had the first experience of working with disturbed children. He also had contact with a former student of John Dewey and learned about Dewey's progressive views on education. These experiences propelled him into crossing the road permanently and he embarked on the career of a clinical psychologist.

He found himself unable to adapt comfortably to either behaviourism or psychoanalysis, but drew initially from both. His first post was in the Child Study Department of the Rochester Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The pressure of work here led to Rogers' discovery that the theories he had learned did not stand up to the test of reality. He also realised that he could become a pioneer and formulate his own ideas based on the experience of those he saw every day in his consulting room.

Amongst the social workers in his department was a student of Otto Rank, and Rogers was also influenced by the work of Rank's student Jessie Taft. He integrated Rankian perspectives with the ideas of Dewey and Kilpatrick and it seems that during this time he came to believe in the individual's capacity to find his or her own way forward.

Rogers wrote his first book in 1939 – 'The Clinical Treatment of the Problem Child'. Here he listed four desirable attributes of the therapist as

1. objectivity
2. a respect for the individual
3. understanding of the self
4. psychological knowledge

During the Rochester period the now famous incident occurred when Rogers gave up on a young child's mother who had consistently rejected his gentle interpretations of her behaviour towards her son, only to be asked by her if he took on adults for counselling. When he said he did she began her story again in her own way and shared her despair and her troubled marital relationship. This proved conclusively to Rogers that it is the client who knows how to proceed, and the therapist's task is to rely on the client for the direction of therapeutic movement.

In 1939 he was offered a professorship at Ohio State University. Here he was able to develop his ideas and in December 1940 he delivered a lecture in Minnesota presenting these ideas – he later came to consider this event as the birthday of client-centred therapy. In the lecture he stressed that the purpose of therapy is not to solve problems, but to help individuals grow and develop so that they can have a more integrated response to life in general.

The lecture generated both enthusiasm and criticism which convinced Rogers he was saying something new – in 1942 he published 'Counseling and Psychotherapy: Newer Concepts in Practice' which had a similar reception.

In 1945 he moved to the University of Chicago to establish a counselling centre. This was set up in line with his beliefs and he refused to take a conventional leadership role.

In 1951 he published 'Client-Centered Therapy' which explores the application of the approach to therapy, group-work, leadership and administrative roles, teaching and training.

In 1957 he took a post at the University of Wisconsin as both Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry, seemingly an opportunity to increase his influence. However, he was not welcomed there with open arms and fell out with many of his new colleagues, particularly in the psychology department.

His fifth book 'On Becoming a Person' was published in 1961 and it was this that achieved national fame and influence for him. This gave him the confidence to resign from the university and to leave the academic environment. He moved to La Jolla to The Western Behavioural Sciences Institute which was a non-profit making organisation which carried out humanistically orientated research into inter-personal relations.

He became greatly involved in the encounter group movement, learning to trust the wisdom of the small group in the same way that he had trusted individuals in one-to-one counselling. He also became more able to express feelings and risk vulnerability. He became increasingly interested in other applications of the approach including education.

Following a change in personnel at the Institute Rogers left to join others in setting up the Center for Studies of the Person, which still exists and where he remained a Resident Fellow until his death. He continued to explore other applications of his approach and these included marriage, business, political life and world peace. In his 70's and 80's he travelled the world taking the approach to places of conflict such as Northern Ireland, South Africa, Poland and Russia.

In 1980 he published 'A Way of Being' which contains amongst other things a powerful vision of the possible world of tomorrow. In 1985 he fulfilled his ambition to bring together influential leaders of 17 countries in a residential conference – an example of his commitment to world peace and nuclear disarmament.

Rogers died in 1987 having just been nominated, unbeknown to him, for the Nobel Peace Prize

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