

A WAY OF MEETING LIFE

an interview with Carl Rogers

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The work of Carl Rogers has been a major creative influence in the human potential movement, from which transpersonal psychology has emerged. Nevertheless, his brand of psychology remains person-oriented, and during the course of the following interview he was challenged by the questions on the transpersonal aspects and spiritual implications and possibilities of his work. Carl Rogers' therapeutic attitude of "positive regard" allowed a probing dialog during the interview.

The late Carl Rogers, Ph.D., was involved for over fifty years in understanding and facilitating the process of personality and behavior change in individuals and groups. He was responsible for the development of client-centered therapy, which is non-Freudian in its approach and depends on the attitude of "unconditional positive regard" in the therapist. He was also a major influence in the development of processes and techniques of group therapy. He authored numerous books, including Client-Centered Therapy, On Becoming a Person, and A Way of Being.

This interview with Dr. Rogers appeared in the Winter 1984 issue of the Laughing Man magazine, three years before his death.

Q: Humanists tend to have unbounded faith in the possibility of Man's use of reason in order to improve life. And they generally dismiss the so-called supernatural or metaphysical aspect of life in their explanations of the world. Thus, humanism often ends up being a full-fledged anthropocentric religion. Would you define your own position in regard to that philosophical perspective?

A: I don't believe that the world or mankind will improve through the exercise of reason alone. If we are going to improve as individuals, as groups, or as institutions or nations, it will be because of learning by the whole person, which includes the intellectual, the emotional, and in recent years I would reluctantly use the word "spiritual" also. A great many of the troubles of our technological society grow out of the fact that we rely totally on the intellect and on reason.

Q: Concepts such as God, Transcendental Self, Universal Consciousness, or God-Realization do not figure in your works. Do they have any place in your personal life?

A: All those terms tend to be loaded with all kinds of connotations. Some people who know me best tell me that I am very spiritual. Maybe I am, though I don't like using religious terminology. I don't believe that this is a chance universe. That I do feel. And whatever force is operating through the universe could very possibly be a struggling force. Our struggle is a part of that universal struggle toward greater perfection, greater harmony. That is a spiritual view of the universe, but it is not one that fits most people's notions of God.

Q: In A Way of Being you list some of the qualities of the person of tomorrow. One of these is a yearning for the spiritual. What do you mean by the term "spiritual"?

A: For me, it tends to have two connotations. One is transcendental. There are moments in group experience or in therapeutic experience where it does seem as though the client and therapist have tapped into something that is larger than either of them. The spiritual also refers to values—a real respect for the worth and dignity of individuals. Humanistic values could well be termed a part of spirituality. I remember once when a group of priests were really pushing me to admit that I was religious. I said, “The real fact of the matter is I’m too religious to be religious.” For me that expresses something quite real. To talk about spirituality or God is not what gives life its religious or spiritual quality. The way I live my life is an attempt to express this aspect, which is better left undefined.

Q: *What makes you reluctant to write or speak about spirituality?*

A: I don’t feel that I can communicate very directly about the spiritual quality of life in a way that would not be misunderstood, because all the words have so many connotations. Recently my view has broadened into a new area that cannot as yet be studied empirically. When I am at my best as a group facilitator or a therapist, when I am closest to my inner intuitive self, or perhaps in a slightly altered state of consciousness, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. My presence alone is releasing and helpful. I cannot force this experience, but when I can relax and be close to my transcendental core, I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship—ways I cannot justify rationally and which have nothing to do with my thought processes. But these strange behaviors turn out to be right in some odd way. Profound growth, healing, and energy are present. At those moments, it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes part of something larger.

Q: *Would you agree that what therapist and client are ultimately striving for is to connect with one another in their feeling prior to all the knowledge and limitations of mind, emotion, and body? That is, do they strive to mutually transcend the apparent separation between them?*

A: Let me talk around that. I think the most profound moments in therapy are those in which you can almost feel an ectoplasmic bond between therapist and client. The bond is so close that each person can speak for the other or know what the other is thinking. I do feel those are the best or highest or most rewarding moments of therapy. I object to the word goal, but to be that close to a person is one of the most satisfying aspects of life.

Q: *Do you feel that this may be the actual basis for restoring that person and oneself to the wholeness that may be there from the beginning?*

A: Yes, I do feel that, though I would be at a loss to describe what brings it about.

Q: *If a person is more than his apparent self, in relationship with other apparent selves, then is self-improvement or self-actualization a sufficient growth model for psychological therapies? Should such models not also include the value of self-transcendence, of discovering or recovering the spiritual identity of Man?*

A: That is a good question. I feel that someone else may develop the point of view of that general trend and direction.

Q: *If you had another eighty-two years to live, would you move into this aspect of research?*

A: It is quite possible. I have taken paths that others have thought were very daring, and yet I think of myself as being very cautious to enter new fields. But it is quite possible that if I had another eighty-two years. I might move in that direction.

Q: *Then do you admit of a difference between the model of growth as it is presently put forward and actual self-transcendence?*

A: My theory of self-actualization grows out of my experience with clients. Should my clients develop more into self-transcending areas, that would necessarily become part of my theory. And I do have some feeling that we may be moving into an era where self-transcendent phenomena are more common, either because they are more accepted, or because it is time for them to emerge.

Q: *It has been argued by Arnold Toynbee, among others, that the great spiritual values, the truly life-enhancing sensibilities, were introduced into human civilization by the great Adepts, or Spiritual Masters, individuals like Jesus, Buddha, or Krishna. How do you feel about the influence of and the need for such great personalities in human history?*

A: I agree that they have served a very life-enhancing purpose, but they have often been very deeply misunderstood, institutionalized in ways that are contrary to their way of life. For instance, I think that there has always been a stream of what I would call real Christianity or real following of some of Jesus' principles. But on top of that have been the enormous accretions of theology and institutionalization that are not really essential to the core of Jesus' teaching.

Q: *Would you conceive of the possibility that such Adepts have Realized a human potential that can serve other people as a goal or possible guideline for their own lives? Could there be a directedness to human evolution that they embodied?*

A: Yes, the thought that comes to mind is Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the noösphere. We may be evolving into new forms of spiritual existence. If so, certainly the historical religious leaders would have been a part of the groundwork for that.

Q: *You have written of a fundamental search that can be summarized in the question "Who am I really?" Have you found a tentative or conclusive answer for yourself?*

A: I find a changing answer. I am sure that I don't know who I am entirely, but it is interesting being in contact with more aspects of myself than I used to be. I think I'm more open to my own experience than I was in times gone by.

Q: *Do you find that the approach of openness also has an emotional counterpart that relates to equanimity or serenity?*

A: Yes. I think that openness in a relationship and openness to oneself both lead toward an inner peace or calm or, if one is lucky, serenity.

Q: *Do you feel that openness itself may be a transcending function? Or could it be developed into one?*

A: I experience that most in the situation I have described of intense closeness with a client. That does seem to be a transcendent form of openness.

Q: *To begin with, you use openness as a kind of key to interaction, but then openness becomes a state of consciousness for you in which a certain serenity or connectedness occurs. Openness is a method and also a state. Is that an accurate description?*

A: It is a continuing way of meeting life. This includes openness to the beauty of my fuchsias, as well as to what is going on in me or what is going on in a relationship.

Q: *Do you have any final comments?*

A: I would say that you have pushed me into examining aspects of my thought that have revealed somewhat new areas. I really appreciate that. It has also made me realize how much I rely on experience rather than abstraction, personal meanings rather than intellectual formulations.