

At the Heart of the South African Struggle  
Carl R. Rogers, Ph.D.  
Resident Fellow  
Center for Studies of the Person  
La Jolla, California  
1986

A black South African activist, ready to go into military training for the anticipated black revolution, is persuaded first to attend a workshop aimed to facilitate open black/white interaction. After four intense, painful days he has come to the conclusion that communication rather than violence is the better way.

A white, formally dressed, tight-lipped Afrikaans educator, a government official, is sent to these sessions by his superior. He announces that he can speak of nothing personal, can only voice government educational policy. After four days of inner struggle, of painful awareness of problems he faces in his family, and several sleepless nights, he tries a totally new way of dealing with protesting black students.

How did such transformations come about? Some of the elements are captured in the journal I dictated during seven weeks of intense work in three South African cities. Some background information will place the journal in its context.

In 1982 I was invited, by a former student of mine, to come to South Africa. He knew I would not meet with any group unless both blacks and whites were present. I went, with a colleague, and we found the whole experience exciting and rewarding. We were especially impressed by the hunger that we found, in both blacks and whites, for communication between the races.

So when we were urged to return in 1986, we outlined the kind of program which would bring us back. We wanted blacks involved from the first in the planning--not simply invited to participate in a program designed by whites. We wanted to work with persons of both races in such a way that they would be more able to facilitate communication between the two groups.

We wanted to provide these individuals with at least some supervised experience in such facilitation. Our aim was to see if meaningful dialogue could be an alternative to violence.

What could we bring to such a program? I and my colleague, Ruth Sanford, had worked with a number of groups containing hostile factions. Thus we could bring relevant experience.

We also brought a coherent and tried way of working with conflict, in and between individuals and groups. On the basis of my experience in psychotherapy, I had studied the conditions which made for personal change in attitudes and behavior. I and many colleagues had developed an approach known as person-centered when working with groups, or client-centered when working with individuals. We had discovered that a definable psychological climate would release, in individuals and in groups, a trustworthy tendency toward constructive personal growth and toward more open and rewarding relationships with others.

We knew that therapists and facilitators had been able to create this change-promoting climate when they were genuine and real, when they were caring and prizing, when they were sensitively empathic, showing a deep understanding which was acceptant and non-judgmental.

*[The following are excerpts from Carl Rogers' journal. They are his complete notes from the final two days of the workshop for training facilitators from black and white racial groups; his notes on the following day; and notes on a meeting with the new facilitators following their own workshop with others in South Africa. They reflect parts of his experiences and learnings. ed.]*  
January 25, 10:30 p.m.

At eight o'clock the group gathered for the evening session. After some discussion of the pros and cons of breaking into two groups, suddenly some people rose, said "The group will split right here," and twenty people went with me into another room; the others remained with Ruth. Slowly

more and more personal reactions came out. A white woman said, "I have tried to understand them. I have laid down in the dirt and let them walk on me. I have given and given. It's about time to stop giving. I must look after and love myself." This brought strong reaction.

Responding to what had been said about unconditional acceptance, a man asked, "Isn't there a point where we must say 'This is evil?'" I acknowledged that there definitely might be a point where I would say "No," or that this to me is evil.

One of the black women said that Peter, a white psychologist, had told her that he thought Harvey, black, had gotten what he wanted, but that it was sort of a trick, that he had wanted to get the group involved with him and admiring of him and then leave, that it was just a game. When she reported this, many of us were enraged at Peter. Larry slowly got up, walked across the room to where Peter sat in the back row, with Shirley just in front of him. Horrified at the possibility of violence, she stood up between them. Larry asked him, "Did you say that?" "Words to that effect," Peter replied rather hesitantly. Larry slapped him on the shoulder or back twice, but it was more of a threat than anything else, for Shirley had put her hand on his arm. I also exploded at Peter, "You seem to believe that everything and everybody is playing games. My God, what a world you must live in and what this says about you." Peter replied, "I don't think I'll make any response. I'll just keep quiet." I said, "Thank you." He was very quiet during the rest of the session.

Marty, a big, powerful black man, who exudes a sense of power and leadership, responded to my remarks about empathy. I had said that I could understand the feelings of the youth who were now, in some instances, in control of the townships, emphasizing the sense of self-esteem and self-confidence which must be so new to them. These feelings were understandable even though their acts were destructive. He said, "It's time for some of us blacks to say to the youth of Soweto, 'O.K., that's enough!'" He meant that cooler heads should take over and the irrational violence should be stopped. "We have to tell Bishop Tutu to give the youth this message."

Karen told of the sharply contradictory feelings within herself. Several years ago her mother died. Her best friends were away. The other whites in the apartment building were very awkward and not very helpful. When her cleaning woman arrived and she told her briefly what had happened, she was immediately held in a large embrace. Before she knew it, all the cleaning people in the building had gathered in her apartment. They held her, they massaged her, they helped her in her grief with a sort of ritual. She felt so supported and cared for, it was amazing to her. Yet in recent years that event has become quite distant in her memory. Instead, what she has been feeling, until the workshop, is that there are too many blacks. She goes downtown and where formerly whites were predominant, now it is blacks, and she wishes they would disappear. She sees the riots in the townships on television. Sometimes she feels real understanding of the rage and bitterness that engenders these riots. At other times she thinks, "This is the behavior of a less evolved race." She realizes that from her earliest days she has been conditioned to believe that the whites are a superior race, that they are more evolved than the blacks, that they are simply further advanced, in technology and in every other way. Yet in this workshop, and when she thinks of the warmth and compassion shown her at the time of her mother's death and in other incidents, she feels that in many ways, "They are really superior to the whites."

To express all these contradictory feelings openly and freely in the presence of black men and women whom she has come to respect, is somehow quite awesome. The response from several blacks was that yes, they have a degree of warmth and compassion, which has almost been their undoing. Roy, a white man, said that every time he goes around his block-- jogging each morning—he sees the blacks coming to work and he feels, "Thank God they're a forgiving race!" A black woman said that she deplored the fact that the younger generation had been so brutalized that they seemed to be losing this warmth and compassion. She finds it tragic that the young blacks have lost this very precious quality, for which she has a special word in her native

language.

All in all, it was a very moving session indeed and I am so pleased that the group had the wisdom and courage to split in two for this session.

Sunday evening, January 26

This has been a day to remember. I will see if I can recapture a few of the highpoints--and deep-points. In the morning session, people were very personal and things seemed to be off to a good start. Blacks were free to criticize whites and did so. Esther (white) told Doris (black) that although she knew that the whites had been unfair to the blacks and had oppressed them, she didn't think it was fair for blacks to simply reverse the situation and be so critical of the whites. She wanted a response from Doris on this, but she remained silent. Then, within a few moments, Coralee, a large, solid black woman who has been quite vocal, broke into a torrent of anger. I don't know yet exactly what triggered her explosion, but she said that she felt cheated in this meeting and disappointed in it and that she was never again going to open up to a white person. It was a real tirade of anger against the workshop, without being very specific. It seemed as though she felt betrayed and I tried to respond along these lines, but without really understanding her feeling. Then Doris, also with great anger, expressed a lot of bitterness and fear. She is regarded by some of her friends in Soweto as a traitor to the black race by coming to this conference. They have told her, "It is beyond the point of talking with whites. Violence is the only answer." She is seen as a fool and worse to come to the workshop. She has tried to hold out against them but some of the things that had gone on this morning had made her feel that they were right, that there was no point in trying to communicate, that violence is the only answer. For the first time I realized the price that the blacks here are paying in order to come to the workshop. She told passionately of the risk she was taking in coming; that she didn't know what might happen to her or to her house as a result of this. She bitterly upbraided the whites. "You have no idea of the sacrifice we are making in coming here. We are regarded as traitors to our people and yet we don't find any real understanding here. You whites don't know what it is to sacrifice. I took enormous risk to come to this workshop and now I don't know whether it's worth it."

We were all quite definitely stunned by the depth of her bitterness and her disappointment and I think it was new to all of the whites that the blacks, simply by attending the facilitator-training, were already being regarded as "whites in black skins" and as betrayers of their people.

I was greatly moved in many ways by this situation. I felt that at last a very deep level of hostility had been brought to the surface. I also felt a new understanding of the situation that the blacks were in. Now, to me, it seemed certain the workshop had moved forward, since we seemed to be touching the very deepest levels of painful, angry, bitter, frightened feelings. I tried to express these feelings and was very emotional in doing so. I had not, for a long time, experienced such deep pain as I felt in trying to comprehend the black situation. I also felt a real hope for the future of the group now that these things had been expressed. To me it was an awesome thing that by helping, with Ruth and others, to set a climate of safety and understanding, that such strong and powerful forces could be released. I felt that the wisdom of the group in the flow of the sessions had been tremendous and that the group process was a really awesome thing. There were plenty of tears round the circle, including mine. Shortly after that we broke for lunch.

When we gathered again at 2:30, I opened with a statement that what we had done was relatively small and simple in comparison with the energy and creativity and initiative which the group process was releasing. I soon realized that my quite positive view of what had occurred was by no means the norm.

Lucy felt that the rift had been widened between the blacks and whites and was greatly troubled that at lunch the two groups had polarized and that now, in the afternoon session, the

blacks were sitting together in two clusters separate from the whites (though all in a circle). Other whites were concerned that the bitterness expressed would destroy communication, still others felt this was a positive, even though very painful, experience. Anton, for example, said that he realized that if violence broke out and if he were to be killed by a black person, he could not feel blame toward that person, even though he, himself, had not done anything to add to the oppression that had made them so bitter. Nonetheless, as a member of the white group he could not expect to avoid danger and possible death.

Esther who had done so much to start all this, said that she was bowled over by the flood of feeling. She now saw how absurd her position was: she had been like a small child stamping her feet and demanding attention in the middle of an earthquake! She felt that this was the blacks had been so hurt and brutalized and oppressed, that to have the whites complain of their petty grievances was just too much.

I think almost every white member of the group was really suffering as they realized the full intensity of the feeling of the blacks, and especially the new recognition of the risk they were taking by even attending this workshop.

Lucy, much concerned because all of the statements were being made by whites, wondered when her black friends would begin speaking to her again. After a long pause, one of the black women said that she was enjoying this period of just reflecting and being silent after all that had gone on. My own intuition was that at some level the black participants were probably feeling considerable satisfaction at seeing the whites suffer in pain, and squirming, undergoing some of the same feelings which they--the blacks--had experienced for so long.

The conversation got more and more gloomy. One woman (white) said, through tears, that she felt this morning had been a demonstration of the truth. As she tried to face it, she had come to the conclusion that there was no other answer than the one given by the blacks--violence. The thing that hurt her most was not even the recognition that there might be violence, she said, but that it seemed to her all communication had been shut off by what had happened.

In two-and-a-half days some people have done a complete reversal of their attitudes. Karen, with her somewhat arrogant and apathetic attitude, realizes now, very keenly, how violent she would be if she were black. She doesn't know whether she will survive what is coming, but she can certainly understand the passions which might result in her own death.

Sunday, January 26 (continued)

I talked individually with Roy, head of personnel for a chain of newspapers. He reported that, as part of their initial agreement with the new black union, there was a procedure for handling grievances: if an employee was fired or disciplined, he could appeal his case. Within the first month, in one of their companies, there were fourteen cases appealed and in eleven of these the disciplinary action was revoked. This means that there were fourteen people who under the old procedure would have gone back to Soweto full of hatred and bitterness and vowing revenge on the company, but now they were treated with justice. He thought it was a safety precaution for the company and good business as well as humane. I said it also indicated how arbitrary and unfair had been the previous disciplinary procedures; he agreed.

During the morning, after her outburst, Coralee stormed out of the room. In view of what she had said about never opening up again to a white person, there was concern as to whether she would return. Joan, white, went after her and persuaded her to return in the afternoon. The white members wanted very much to keep in good contact with the blacks.

During the afternoon, when members were talking about their chances of survival and whether they would be stabbed or shot, one added, "...or necklaced." I learned later of this particular form of horror. The victim is tied up, a tire is placed around his neck, gasoline is poured into the tire and then ignited. It is a horrible flaming death. I do not know how frequently it has been done, but it is frequently mentioned.

In the evening Roy (white) told how revolted he feels by the fact that hundreds and hundreds of black children are starving to death. However, when a small white child needs a liver transplant, a half—million rand are immediately raised to pay for the operation. He finds this a terrible thing when he thinks how far a half-million rand would go toward feeding the poor. He says unemployment is terribly high. It is hard to know the real figures. He is horrified at the results of disinvestment by American companies, so fervently desired by American students. When a company proudly announces that it is withdrawing its investments from South Africa, the immediate result is hundreds or thousands of blacks added to the rolls of the unemployed. He says that disinvestment has very little effect on the whites of South Africa, whom it is supposed to influence, but its results on the black population, whom it is supposed to help, are deadly.

Monday, January 27

The last day of the facilitator workshop.

I opened the afternoon meeting by saying that I wanted to tell of what I had learned in the workshop. I had come hoping that we could all improve communication and I felt that this aim had been achieved, that communication had gone on at deeper and deeper levels, until some very basic attitudes and feelings were expressed. But the result of such communication was for all of us to recognize how deep was the gulf which separated the cultures and how difficult to bridge. I felt concern that in a selected group such as this it was vital that blacks and whites should remain in communication and I hoped that some means could be found for it. There was silence--long, heavy silence. Thomas J., the black minister, finally said something about acceptance, "We are not ready for unconditional positive acceptance." No black member spoke enthusiastically of the workshop, though tribute was paid to Ruth and to me for our humility, our willingness to listen, and so forth. There was more heavy silence. When the time was up I said that I was not going to try to make any incisive analysis of the group, that I felt I did not fully understand what had happened. I hoped that I would be more clear about it next weekend when we meet with the 360 people and these same forty individuals would be facilitators. I said I had felt the somber tone of the meeting and the heaviness of the silences.

The workshop was ending in an open-ended fashion, with no clear outcome.

Tuesday, January 28

Last night I had a hard time going to sleep. I was quite keyed up from the workshop. Gradually I felt that I saw a more coherent pattern of what had emerged and I developed some new insights into the process.

Most of the white participants were quite shocked by the degree of bitterness and rage felt by the blacks and their attitude that they had had all that they could take. The fact that they felt that even meeting with a group like this, dedicated to communication, was probably useless, was quite a jolt. The blacks felt that they had exhausted the possibilities of talking and that perhaps violence is the only answer. All this, as I say, was quite a shock to the white members, yet, with one or two exceptions, it made them all the more eager to try to build a bridge to try to communicate with the blacks here and eventually with the black community.

The thing that I did not quite catch at the time, because it was not so dramatic, was that the blacks were even more shocked by what came out of the mouths of the whites. After all, this was a highly educated group, an influential group, a group that was friendly to black people, a group that was helping to improve communication. Yet here were some of these whites saying things like: "A study shows that white women who marry black men tend more frequently to dream of monkeys and apes." (Implying that black men are ape-like.) "I want to change this attitude but deeply ingrained in me is the conviction that if a black is given a machine to operate, he will break it. If he's given a computer to operate, it will foul up. They tend to screw up everything they do.;" "When we visited a black home, my friend refused to eat with a spoon that had been

used by blacks; we've been taught that we should never use anything that has been used by black people because it has germs." "I wish somebody could convince me that I'm wrong, but I've read articles that say, and I guess I believe them, that the black race is lower on the evolutionary scale than the white. Look at the technology the whites have created, where the blacks have not." Without exception, these statements were always qualified as being longstanding prejudices which the speaker hoped to change. Nevertheless, it was clear that they still held weight. The blacks, I believe, felt that here was the "cream of the crop" of white South Africans, still voicing deep prejudices, beliefs and convictions, which would make communication almost impossible. I think it was this that caused Jessica (black) to say, "It is worse than I thought." It was this that caused Thomas J. to say, "We blacks are not ready for unconditional positive acceptance," meaning that he could not possibly accept the person, much less the behavior, of a white who held such sentiments.

Another thing struck me. The blacks felt bitterness about their oppressors, but they did not mean these particular whites. In fact they, I'm sure, believed the whites when each tended to say, "I understand your anger, but of course I personally did not oppress you." So, even though many of the whites recognize that they were in a real sense responsible, though not guilty, the statements by the blacks were not personally offensive or hurtful. For the blacks, on the other hand, the situation was different. It is probable that they felt personally insulted. When a white woman says that almost against her will she believes that the blacks are a less evolved race, this cannot help but mean that she regards the black woman sitting next to her as inferior. This, it seems to me, would feel very insulting.

Another difference that I noted: the feelings among the blacks were quite unified and clear-cut. They felt oppressed, angry that their freedoms were restricted, curtailed in so many ways, and that they were treated in an unjust manner. There was a clarity about their feelings.

The feelings of the whites were profoundly conflicted. They wanted better relationships, better communication, better feelings between the races. They felt that they were good persons working toward these goals. On the other hand, they felt that they were prejudiced, were ashamed of their prejudicial attitudes, felt that they were immature in comparison to the blacks, that they have so much to unlearn and learn, that in some ways the blacks were definitely superior to them. Where the feelings of the blacks were clear, the feelings of the whites were confused.

I feel that, for these forty participants, the workshop achieved a much greater clarity between the two races. I would have predicted that when these deep angers and hatreds and fears and prejudices were revealed, that more positive communication would ensue. It did not. Perhaps it will improve communication in the future, but by the end of the workshop it had not done so in any obvious way.

From the various personal contacts, it is very clear that individuals in the workshop were greatly changed. They will deal with the other race quite differently because of the workshop. Nonetheless, it is significant that there was no unified attempt to continue communication within this group. I am so grateful that we will be meeting this whole group again next weekend, when they are facilitating the large workshop, and will have a chance on Monday morning to learn their follow-up reactions to the workshop, and to their experience as facilitators.

Monday, February 3 (six days later)

From 8:30 until almost 1:00 o'clock, we again met the facilitators from the four-day workshop. When we left each other at the end of that four-day event, the mood was somber, silent, the group polarized. Now, having worked in black/white pairs on a common task during the last two days in the large workshop, they felt close, the morale was good, they were proud of having done a good job; There was a real sense of unity. The exciting aspect was that, having lived through the group process themselves, they had also now facilitated a group, with much the same pattern and process. They felt definitely exhilarated that it didn't take a Carl Rogers to

facilitate a group. They had been able to initiate this process themselves and had seen it operate.

During the tea break, Karen came to me quite tearfully. She felt that since revealing her prejudices she had not been accepted by any of the blacks; it was a mistake that she had been a part of the group since her presence had driven the blacks and whites into opposing camps.

As far as she personally was concerned, it had been an excruciatingly painful but marvelous experience. She felt as though within herself the geophysical plates of the earth were moving, shifting, changing--the depth of the change was profound. I encouraged her to say some of this in the group and, later, she did. Finally, after a long silence, some of the whites praised her courage and her contribution. Then Jessica (black) told how she had personally felt insulted by some of Karen's prejudices and was having to search herself to find why this had been so. The ideas were in no sense new, yet somehow when they were voiced, Jessica felt they were directed at her, personally. She and some other blacks really confirmed and validated Karen's contribution to the group, though not minimizing the pain and insult they felt at her statements.

When the time drew near for closing, Shirley said that she wanted to focus again on what might happen next. Several plans were proposed. Groups might be held, etc., but I finally said, "I notice that everyone of these plans, which to me sound very interesting, has been voiced by a person with a pale skin. Is there a difference in culture, or what does this mean?" Again there was a very long pause and I was beginning to feel quite baffled. Finally, Doris, in an almost tearful voice, said she wants so much to hold a group for young people in Soweto. They need so badly to learn self-esteem, to begin to appreciate themselves, to understand themselves, but it is going to be so hard.

Then she continued talking, about the difficulties of her work because of how opposed blacks were to any limitation of pregnancies. Among the young black youth now, the slogan is "Every girl must become pregnant by the end of the year to replace all the black babies who have been killed." At the end of that time each girl will be tracked down and, if not pregnant, her contraceptives will be taken from her, to make sure that every teenage girl gets pregnant! Joyce deplors it, because she's in a health care agency and they get all the babies from teenage pregnancies. It is a very sad story: some of them premature; some of them under-nourished; nearly all of them poorly cared for. It seems horrible to her that there is this drive to get all the girls pregnant. Like Doris she wants to work with the group that is at hand and do her best to educate the black teenage girls. Other black members added what they were hoping to do. It seemed to me that my concern had been answered, that the blacks were trying to turn their hand at once to the situations which existed right now in their own community.

I noted that our time was long since up, and the group slowly broke up with embraces, kisses, hugs, tears on the part of both men and women. Almost all of the facilitator pairs had been black and white so that they had really gotten to know one another on a one-to-one basis.

This has been one of the most powerful groups in which I have ever been involved.