

# Why Is This Man Laughing?

In the April, 1995 issue of the Family Therapy Networker, in his article "The Overselling of Therapy," eminent behaviorist Neil Jacobson delivers a devastating critique of the therapy industry. In particular he challenges claims that there is scientific evidence, based in well designed studies, showing either that psycho-therapy is an effective treatment for mental illness or that a psycho-therapist's training and experience in any particular methodology is correlated positively with therapeutic outcome. He states that despite widespread belief that some therapies are proven effective for treatment of depression for example – namely cognitive therapy, interpersonal psycho-therapy and antidepressant medications- "when the actual outcomes of these treatments are examined in terms of their clinical significance, the results are disturbing...only a minority of patients (19-32% compared with 20% placebo) improved."

In the same issue of the Networker Scott Miller, Mark Hubble

and Barry Duncan come to a similar conclusion saying, "While the number of therapy models has proliferated, mushrooming from 60 to more than 400 since the mid-1960s, 30 years of clinical outcome research have not found any one theory, model, method or package of techniques to be reliably better than any other." As Jacobson says, "Such data ought to make psychotherapists squirm."

But not so, client-centered therapists. That's why Carl Rogers is laughing or would be if he were here to read these latest research findings.

It turns out that both the Jacobson article and Miller, Hubble and Duncan come to

similar conclusions. Carl Rogers was right. After all our forays into the dizzying arcana of paradoxical interventions, inner children, narrative therapy, EMDR, behaviorism, psychopharmacology, bioenergetics, TA, Jungian analysis, psychodrama, gestalt and so on down the entire list of 400 brand named therapies, what actually creates change is the client's own motivation and the presence of a facilitating person who can offer acceptance, respect, warmth, empathy, and genuineness. It

is over fifty years since Rogers published *Counseling and Psychotherapy* which offered the startling insight, influenced by Otto Rank, that the creation of a relationship between client and therapist characterized by what he called the "core conditions" of client centered psychotherapy was the sine qua non of healing or growth experiences. He demonstrated through enormous amounts of research, admittedly by Jacobson's standard methodologically flawed, that therapy works best when:

- clients feel free to determine their own agenda for their life and for their therapy and to describe their own subjective experience in their own way;

## *Carl Rogers*

- they are accompanied by someone who has faith in them, listens empathetically and accurately for the deeper meanings of their expressions, and who deals with them honestly without roles and manipulative games;
- the relationship is as egalitarian as possible without the "power-over" authoritarian posture so common to medical and educational settings of the 1940s.

During the whiz-bang '80s the simple but subtle client-centered work of Rogers and his followers became overshadowed by flashier, more therapist-centered approaches promoted by charismatic miracle-workers. They offered drama, magic and claims of instant, one-

session miracles. In contrast to family psychodramas, altered states, or goddess rituals, client-centered therapy seemed too slow, not to mention bland and “white bread.”

Well, now we know. The client-centered or person-centered therapists were right. It isn't the technique, it isn't the therapist, it isn't the level of training, it isn't the new wonder drug, it isn't the diagnosis. It is our clients' own inborn capacities for self-healing, and it is the meeting – the relationship in which two or more sovereign and sacred “I's” meet as “we” to engage with significant questions of existence.

Now let me be clear what I am NOT saying. I do not mean to suggest that the rich and varied spectrum of psychological theories and practices are irrelevant or meaningless. Not at all. Whether a therapist speaks the language of psychoanalysis, existentialism, Marxism, feminism, dance, transpersonalism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc. obviously makes an important difference to both therapist and client. But the importance is not in the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the approach. The therapeutic approach provides the metaphoric system, the frames of reference, the meaning laden narratives, through which experience can be understood. But the data cited by Miller, Hubble and Duncan suggest that positive outcome is correlated with whether or not the therapist can enter the frames of reference of the client – not the other way round. Disciplinary training is helpful only in so far as it allows the therapist to better enter the phenomenal world of the client or its articulation of what Aldous Huxley referred to as “The Perennial Wisdoms” is compelling enough that the client will adopt it as an explanatory frame for their own self-examination. As Arthur Bohart says, at bottom “All therapy is self-therapy.”

The curative factors in virtually all effective healing, whatever the metaphoric system or ritualistic trappings, are those identified by Rogers fifty years ago.

**No wonder he's laughing!**

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For the last thirty five years The La Jolla Program has attempted to be true to the original vision of Carl Rogers. Every summer for all those years people have arrived from around the world, speaking all of the over two dozen languages into which Rogers' work has been translated, to meet together for a week or two in person-centered community. Applying techniques no more (or less) dramatic than meeting together in small groups and large, they have experienced first hand the extraordinary impact of ordinary human connection. Over and over again they have had their faith in simple dialogue affirmed, as they have talked to each other, listened and empathized and have accompanied each other into the depths and heights of human experience.

This summer will be no different. The La Jolla Program, the longest running person-centered approach program will convene on the beautiful University of California at San Diego campus and once again invite participants to take the simple, yet profoundly challenging risk of becoming more fully human with each other. Facilitated by people who worked for years with Rogers, in La Jolla and across the world, another multicultural group will wrestle with the difficulties and joys of authentic community and will become part of the larger global person-centered approach community.

The La Jolla Program 2002 dates are July 28-August 4. For more information write to Will Stilwell:  
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