

THE HIDDEN STORY OF NON-DIRECTIVE COUNSELLING

by Wanda Skowronska

One of the most popular figures in counselling psychology during the past century was Carl Rogers [1902 – 1987].



Carl Rogers

American psychologist Richard Farson wrote of him:

"He has changed the way we all think about human relationships, the expectations we have about intimate personal contact, the nature of interpersonal and organizational behaviour. ...there has probably not been a single organizational development or management training program in twenty-five years which has not been built on his theoretical formulations."

Rogers' influence persisted well beyond his death. In 2007 in response to a survey question as to which psychologist had most influenced their counselling, the findings showed:

"The single most influential psychotherapist – by a landslide – was Carl Rogers. In other words, the therapist who became famous for his leisurely, nondirective, open-ended, soft-focus form of therapy 50 years ago remains a major role model today."

Rogers was a leader in humanistic psychology movement [or 'human potential'

psychology] which arose in reaction to Freud and the behaviourists. They saw Freud as too pessimistic and deterministic and saw the behavioural psychologists as too focused on 'rats and stats'. Rogers, along with his humanistic peers, extolled the inner potential of the human person, expressed great confidence in human progress riding the post war boom and desire to move on from the past. It was a message people were desperate to hear after the devastation of war and unease with Freud's pessimism.

Rogers developed principles of 'client centred' counselling which were to become standard fare for counselling psychology students. In his best seller *On Becoming a Person* [1961], Rogers stated that the counsellor was best able to communicate when demonstrating 'Empathy, Congruence and Unconditional Positive Regard.' This would occur in a non-directive, non-judgmental counselling session, that is where the therapist does not overtly direct the person's thoughts but is open to listen and encourage the person's strengths.



Rogers was genuine in seeking the factors which improved communication and lessened conflict and mistrust. In fact Rogers found his approach worked well with the children of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Why? Because few if

any had listened to these neglected children and in listening, Rogers gave them space to tell their stories which helped them recover a sense of dignity. Rogers went on to apply his non-directive counselling to adults and expanded his technique to an all-embracing worldview, a 'morally neutral' stance, a philosophy of life. This neutrality would supposedly help clients discover of their autonomous selves as they found solutions to their own problems and the freer they became, the more self-fulfilled they would become.

One can see that in reality there were two aspects to Rogers' non directive approach – 'listening' and 'being morally neutral'. Rogers' emphasis on listening entailed the therapist's temporary self-effacement and attempt to enter the world of another person – to see it his/her way. One can easily see the benefit in this. It brings to mind people who don't listen – those who interrupt while one is speaking, who give a lecture when grief is being poured out, who judge before one has told the whole story, who fail to see vulnerability and simply tell people to 'just get over it', those who 'know' everything before one has begun to speak, people who are not 'there' for you in the way people need others to be there for them. Not to listen is a fault, a vice, something to be overcome. Rogers encouraged listening in a world that needed to hear it and in this sense his non-directive approach encouraged silent, attentive presence. But listening cannot be done by technique alone, it involves listening to something, to what is being said. Rogers' non-directive approach becomes unstuck in its notion that there is such a thing as a morally neutral stance, a view influenced by The Humanist Manifesto of 1933 and

particularly John Dewey's A Common Faith [1933] which became a secular 'bible', though its followers denied religious leanings. The 'morally neutral' stance in fact was not neutral at all, it was a faith, as it expressed a view of the human person's nature and destiny, usually the province of theology.



The secular humanist 'faith' believed that a human being was essentially good and could find a way to self-fulfilment unfettered by social and moral rules. It was radically at odds with the Judeo-Christian worldview and it also ignored evidence of the human tendency to evil. It jettisoned the notion of original sin, the possibility of a Creator or revelation. This secular faith was an offshoot of nineteenth century atheism and especially the Romantic notion of self-creation, therapy taking the place of aesthetic development in this case. Rogers was an evangeliser of a faith, although he would no doubt turn over in his grave to be remembered as such. Rogers' counselling, far from being non-directive was very directive, a transmitter of the secular liberalist faith whose views were not neutral, which ignored the predominantly held Judeo-Christian beliefs of many counselling clients, and in doing so, expressing a value judgement about them. In simply reflecting clients' statements, whether morally sensitive, obnoxious or vile – Rogers was surreptitiously persuading

clients that all views are equal and values are self-generated. Of course this subtly directs the client to think that such self-generated values are good and thus steps over the line into the land of metaphysics which asks - what is good, and why is anything good? These were questions Rogers skilfully avoided, sweeping away the Judeo-Christian heritage, while promulgating his view that moral neutrality was possible. Uncomfortable questions such as what happens if one's perceived self-fulfilment conflicts with another's, or involves harming someone else, fade away before the utopian belief that one's self-fulfilment will harmonise with that of everyone else in the universe. Roger's friendly avuncular demeanour in fact disguised the directiveness of his counselling theories and little by little brainwashed people into a utopian view with its anti-Christian, anti-authority, anti-moral law notions.

Critics of Rogers often fail to take into account the two aspects of what is commonly known as 'non-directive' counselling – its advocacy of openness to listening and its search for more authentic communication were laudable aims.

William Coulson, could say Rogers was 'a terrific human being' even after he broke all contact with him and returned to his Catholic faith. He referred to interpersonal qualities such as Rogers' openness to listening and genuine desire to help those in distress. Coulson's break-away came when he realized the implicit moral view Rogers was marketing, a personal relativism, and later regretted that he [Coulson] had participated in inundating the Catholic world with humanistic psychology. With newly graduated Catholic psychologists exploiting

the traditional Catholic trust in experts and with little critical evaluation of Rogers at the time, many Catholics fell for a version of humanism referred to in Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* – 'a total emancipation of humanity wrought solely by human effort' – ignoring the existence of God and the spiritual dimension of human growth. As Paul Vitz, lone Catholic critic of Rogers in the 1970s foresaw, Rogerian counselling's implicit theories were dangerous in being an alternate secular faith and placing too much burden on the self. No person can control fate, can guarantee perfect self-fulfilment – the failure to do so became implicit 'sins' in the Rogerian worldview. One can appreciate how this notion of self-creation and fate control became a bridge to the new age movement with its notions of self-created universes and the gods and goddesses within. With time a reaction occurred and the critiques of Rogers by Vitz and Coulson helped spark a movement among psychologists which reincorporated Christian theological anthropology into counselling psychology. It replaced its reductive secular humanism, which sidelined spiritual issues, with a true Christian humanism which listened with spiritual empathy to the perennial transcendent questions which have always compelled the human heart and soul. ■

