

Carl Rogers, the man and his ideas

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Introduction

Since nursing is a helping profession, the principles set forth by Carl Rogers are particularly pertinent because the helping relationship, which we acknowledge as his main heritage, has been taught and practiced in nursing for decades. But even though we are familiar with his work on personal growth, education, human relationships and psychiatry, at least superficially, we perhaps do not realize to what extent his theory, centred on the person, whether it be the patient or the student, can be subversive.

Indeed, if we apply his theories to the letter in our centres of care and education, it would provoke a real revolution and our systems, which are presently aligned on economics and administration, would find another meaning. (Image)¹



The personal accomplishment of students and their evolution would become the ultimate goal of education and the satisfaction of the needs of patients and their well-being would become the primary aim of health care. Putting the human first, organizing everything according to what the patient requires, would certainly drastically change our systems of management which have become too bureaucratic, too costly and alas, too often not efficient enough. Unfortunately, it is probably not tomorrow that this organizational revolution will turn our institutions upside down...

But the seeds of humanism that Carl Rogers has sown by his teachings and his personality have nevertheless fallen on fertile ground in the nursing profession since many caregivers find meaning in their work with the sick via the helping relationship, that is by striving for authenticity, by bringing the warmth of their presence to those whom they care for, and by the empathy that they give them.

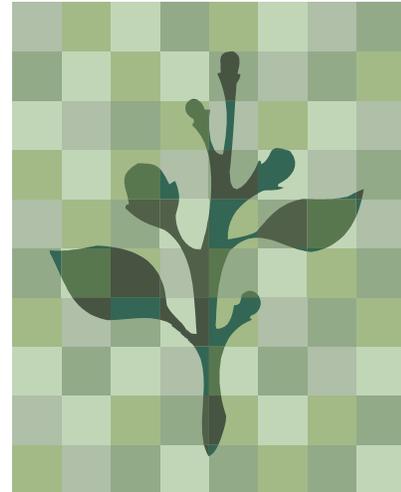
The man, who was he?

At the time of my first contact with the theories of Carl Rogers I was captivated by their humanism and the profundity of meaning that they could have for nursing. At that moment, I was fascinated, among other things, by his definition of the "actualizing

¹. Image. Alain Rioux. *Carl Rogers, psychologue fondateur de l'approche non-directive* : <http://alainriouxpq.iquebec.com/rogers.htm>

tendency" which drives humans to evolve. He compared it to the vital force that can be found in the acorn of an oak tree and is what makes it grow, with time and essential conditions, to become a giant. In essence he said: "There is in man all that is required for him to evolve, just as in an oak acorn there is all that is necessary to make a big tree."

Later, when I became better acquainted with his personal and professional evolution, the memory of this beautiful comparison came back to me and I was not surprised to learn to what extent nature was part and parcel of his youth, and that he had even begun his studies in agronomy. His experience in a rural environment shows through in his preoccupation for the unending personal growth of all beings from the germination of their potential possibilities.



Born on January 8, 1902 at Oak Park, near Chicago, Carl Ransom Rogers grew up in a profoundly Christian family of six children. Living on a farm, he received a strict religious education, and grew up rather isolated, and withdrawn. As a result of his university education in agronomy and his own personal curiosity, he developed a scientific and pragmatic attitude that characterised him all his life and enabled him to become a renowned researcher. (Mariam Kinget et Carl Rogers, 1962, tome 1, p. 148).

However, in 1920, his education and his profound preoccupations led him to switch to theology with a view to eventually becoming a minister. He was chosen along with other students to go on a trip to China. This opening on the world, this immersion in other beliefs, other cultures and other ways of seeing life, shook his beliefs. (Carl Rogers, 1966, p. 6.). At the end of his studies, he bid farewell to his family, married a childhood friend and left to study in a very liberal seminary in New York. There he made his first contact with the world of the relationship to the other, the kind of relationship that he had lacked in his childhood and which became his favourite subject.



In 1926, he again changed his orientation and took up studies in clinical psychology and education in which he obtained a doctorate.

His subsequent work for a society for the prevention of cruelty to children and his practice with problem children, led him to realize the limits of the methods that were then currently used. But these jobs brought him in contact with children and he even became a director of a centre for child counseling. All the while, he pursued his studies on relationships and the analysis of the counseling relationship from which he gleaned many insights that later marked his writings.

A break with the dominant ideas of his time

Feeling constrained by the behaviourist and Freudian theories of the time, and armed with the strategies of directive counseling that he had learned, Carl Rogers felt the need to develop other ways of doing which had greater respect for the freedom and dignity of the person. For example, he questioned the limitations of behaviourist psychology that studied mechanisms of behaviour by looking only at outward behaviours that could be recorded and measured. These theories essentially considered behaviour as responses to the environment or to stimuli and reduced all to conditioning, which Carl Rogers had trouble accepting.²

Beneficial influences

He was however influenced by other approaches such as the Gestalt theory and the theory of the individual self, promulgated by Otto Rank, whose opinions on psychoanalysis he shared. Rank had written, “With Freud, the self or ego is in a way stuck between two invincible forces: the interior id and the exterior super ego, of which they are barely a passive tool. One is consequently driven by the libido of the id and inhibited by moral factors inherited from our parents.”³, (Mariam Kinget et Carl Rogers, 1962, tome 1, p. 149). His personal reflexions on these subjects enabled him to resolve his own internal conflict caused by the dominant theories and to finally find his own way which would mark the “disciplines of the helping relationship” such as education and nursing.

A productive career

His publications, which were already well received, and the influence of his ideas prompted him to occupy a university chair in the Faculty of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Ohio in 1940, and later at the University of Chicago, where he published his famous book, *Client-Centered Therapy* which set the basis for his now famous approach. In 1961, he published *On Becoming a Person* in which he explained personal growth and the conditions required for listening to others and the practice of the helping relationship.

The later years of a full life

Then came the moment of disillusion. Disenchanted by university life on his return to the University of Wisconsin, from 1964 on he worked solely in private institutes and founded the Centre for Studies of the Person at La Jolla in California. In 1969, he published *Freedom to Learn*, which brought a breath of fresh air to the world of education. He profoundly influenced this rigid environment, too often limited by inflexible, authoritarian, dogmatic and limiting theories.

² . Le béhaviorisme : <http://agora.qc.ca/mot.nsf/Dossiers/Behaviorisme>

³ . Otto Rank : <http://www.megapsy.com/Textes/Rank/biblio013.htm>

After a full life, numerous publications, rigorous research, memorable encounters around the world and a remarkable influence on psychology and education, he died on February 4, 1987 in California after surgery for a fractured pelvis suffered during a fall. He was internationally recognized for his exceptional contributions. President Carter hailed him as a “peace maker”⁴ (André Peretti : http://www.unpsy.fr/mort_rogers.html)¹. His works have become classics and continue to influence our approach to teaching and learning and to modulate our relationship to the patient.

Rogerian theories that have influenced us

From the very beginning, the ideas of Carl Rogers made their mark. He himself was astonished at the breadth of his own influence.



He compared the impact of his message to the ripples that a stone makes on hitting the still surface of a lake. The ever enlarging circles seem to have no relation to the size of the initial stone. He also used this comparison to demonstrate the actualizing potential of a person, showing that they have resources which one cannot even begin to imagine.

Among the dominant ideas of Carl Rogers which have most influenced us in nursing, are without a doubt, those concerned with the helping relationship and those which deal with education. His writings and conferences on these subjects have had extraordinary notoriety around the world and were



Understanding implies a risk. If I allow myself to really understand another person, this understanding may change me. And we fear change .

Le développement de la personne. Paris, Dunod, 1968, p. 17 (On becoming a person.)

⁴. André Peretti : http://www.unpsy.fr/mort_rogers.html.

rapidly known in Quebec and have enriched our teaching and our relationship with patients.

The helping relationship

The helping relationship is now well known and we take it almost for granted since it is so familiar to us, being part and parcel of our basic nursing principles. But we should think about the effect of this concept in its own time as a revolution and a renewal as much in the domain of health care as in the realm of education. It was a wake-up call to unexplored horizons. Such openness to the other was previously unknown.

It is true that, based as it was on his fundamental confidence in man, his client-centred approach aimed at the constructive actualization of the possibilities of a person and their evolution towards well-being is not always obvious. Indeed, it puts the relationship at the centre of the caring process such that the nurse, conscious of her own identity and her own limits, opens herself to the experience of the other and accepts it in an unconditional manner. Penetrating the patient's universe, she manifests positive consideration, respecting his freedom and dignity thus becoming an empathetic and non-directive companion of their suffering. In his time this was extremely innovative.

But one aspect of this approach, which is particularly delicate, is that in order to put it into practice, the qualities of being of the caregiver are strongly solicited and the relational climate which is established becomes essential to facilitate the process of growth. The caregiver's authenticity, congruence and capacity to listen are primordial. The qualities of presence, empathy, congruence and unconditional acceptance are prerequisites in order to establish this relationship. One can easily understand that these are very demanding conditions (Margot Phaneuf, 2002, p. 320-380).

Under the influence of Carl Rogers, the climate of the caring relationship slowly evolved to become less authoritarian. He also popularised the term "counselling" which corresponded better to the idea that he had of the therapist-patient encounter. He also contributed to the expansion of psychotherapy by his non-directive approach centred on the emotional aspects of a problem rather than on their intellectual or pathological aspect. His first objective was to enable the person to rediscover the meaning of their life, their dignity and self-esteem in order to help them discover the best direction to take and to identify, if possible, their own solutions. Again, his ideas drastically changed the established order.

The Rogerian view of learning

We associate the name of Carl Rogers with empathy and the helping relationship, which are so important in nursing, but we do not always realize the important influence that he had on education. His vision in this domain was also innovative.



He saw

the student as responsible, autonomous and possessing an aptitude for learning. The same conditions as described for the helping relationship, that of a facilitating atmosphere, also apply to education. Consequently, in this light, confidence in the student, the respect of their individuality, their capacity to make choices and their creativity are essential to the teacher. Acceptance, non-direction and positive consideration are not to be mistaken for an attitude of *laissez-faire* but rather as conditions for the cultivation of a space where the student can grow.

The teacher thus becomes a resource person, a facilitator of learning.² This manner of considering education was revolutionary and Rogers justified it by saying that [...] If we want citizens who can live in the constantly changing world which is ours, we can only achieve this if they become apprentices, acting and taking responsibility for their acts [...] in the actual state of knowledge, this type of apprentice develops best in a relationship which permits growth which is facilitating, in other words, in the context of a relationship with a person.⁵

A great humanist and pacifist

Towards the end of his life, Carl Rogers set aside his study of human relationships and individual problems to turn to social and political problems.



He thus enlarged his vision, and became interested in communities and world problems. He said in substance “I am an explorer in my own way and what one does not realize is that what I am talking about signifies a major transformation of our actual institutions”. For this reason his

ideas were controversial and created fear. Moreover, suspicious of orthodoxies and hierarchies of all kinds, a new and rare phenomenon in the political world, he was mostly preoccupied with authenticity and personal fulfillment, rejecting the race for honours, productivity and power. These ideas may seem idealistic and completely unrealistic but it is probably true that if we want humanity to have a future, we will have to evolve a new kind of human who possesses the capacity to live harmoniously with other beings.

Conclusion

The ideas of Carl Rogers are profoundly original. Whether it is in the domain of counseling, education, nursing or politics, his teachings have left their mark and are always up pertinent. All of these aspects presuppose demanding applications however, they enable us to envision an evolving society where by actively listening to the other, in

⁵. Quotations taken from *Liberté pour apprendre*: <http://www.gilles-jobin.org/citations/?P=r&au=301>).

the respect of their differences and with empathetic comprehension, human relationships could be transformed and enable all of us to live in a better world.

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