



## Becoming A Person

Sermon by Tara Stephenson

**"On Becoming A Person"- Carl R. Rogers is considered to be the most influential psychotherapist of the 20th century (yes, even more influential than Freud). What did he have to say about the nature of human beings and conditions needed for human growth? What would he have to say to contemporary Unitarian Universalists?**

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## Reading

Excerpted from “The Emerging Person” from Carl Rogers: The Man and His Ideas, by Richard I. Evans (1975)

That portion of Western culture which has developed in the United States appears to be in a process of decline and decay. That decay is marked by increasing disbelief in the democratic process, disarray in other institutions, widespread disparity in the economic system, and the alienation of many of our youth.

But one lesson I have often learned in my garden is that the brown and rotting mess of this year's plant is a mulch in which next year's new shoots may be discovered. So too, I believe that in our decaying culture we see the dim outlines of new growth, of a new revolution, of a culture of a sharply different sort. I see that revolution as coming not in some great organized movement, not in a gun-carrying army with banners, not in manifestos and declarations, but through the emergence of a new kind of person, thrusting up through the dying, yellowing, putrefying leaves and stalks of our fading institutions.

This emerging person would not bring utopia. He would make mistakes, be partially corrupted, go overboard in certain directions. But she would foster a culture which would emphasize certain trends, a culture which would be moving in these directions.

- Toward a non-defensive openness in all interpersonal relationships—within the family, the working task force, the system of leadership.
- Toward the exploration of self and the development of the richness of the total, individual, responsible human soma—mind and body.
- Toward the prizing of the individual for what he or she is, regardless of sex, race, status, or material possessions.
- Toward human-sized groupings in our communities, our educational facilities, our productive units.
- Toward a close, respectful, balanced, reciprocal relationship to the natural world.
- Toward the perception of material goods as rewarding only when they enhance the quality of personal living.
- Toward a more even distribution of material goods.
- Toward a society with minimal structure—human needs taking priority over any tentative structure which develops.
- Toward leadership as a temporary, shifting function based on competence for meeting a specific social need.
- Toward a more genuine and caring concern for those who need help.
- Toward a human conception of science—in its creative phase, the testing of its hypotheses, the valuing of the humanness of its applications.
- Toward creativity of all sorts—in the thinking and exploring—in the areas of social relationships, the arts, social design, architecture, urban and regional planning, science.

To me, these are not frightening trends but exciting ones. In spite of the darkness of the present, our culture may be on the verge of a great evolutionary-revolutionary leap. I simply say with all my heart: Power to the emerging person and the revolution carried within

### "On Becoming a Person" Tara Stephenson

Carl R. Rogers, one of the most famous psychotherapists in history, was born on January 8, 1902 in a suburb of Chicago. He grew up as one of six children in a close and loving family. When he was 12, his parents relocated to a farm further away from the city, partly to escape secular influences on this religiously very fundamentalist family. He was in college before he began to realize that his parents' views on religion weren't the only ones and that he could question them. After his graduation, he entered Union Theological Seminary in New York, a real hotbed of theological liberalism. While by my interpretation of his writings, he would remain a very spiritual person to the end of his life, the experience convinced him that he didn't want to be tied to any one denomination. After a short time, he transferred to Teacher's College at Columbia University, and received his doctorate in clinical and educational psychology from that university. And the rest, as they say, is history (Nye, 1975).

He went on to develop an entirely different kind of psychotherapy from the prevailing psychoanalysis and behaviorism of his early career. The psychoanalytic view was that a person's biology and childhood determined what was possible for that person. Since both the biology and the childhood were already determined, the individual's options and potential for change were severely limited. Behavioral psychologists shared the psychoanalysts' view that biology had a lot to do with the way people acted, but placed absolutely no emphasis on interior life; emotions or thoughts. They believed that people acted as they did because they had LEARNED certain behaviors from the consequences of previous actions. B.F. Skinner, one of the most extreme of them, often wrote of the power of the psychologist to control behavior through conditioning. He wondered why we would choose not to use it to cure society's ills.

Rogers, one of the pioneers in the third wave of psychotherapy, humanistic therapy, came to believe in attending to the individual person as she or he was AT THAT MOMENT. He believed that giving people unconditional acceptance created a climate wherein they were free to reflect on their feelings and choose to be the person they truly were.

This new kind of therapy was first called non-directive, then client-centered, then person-centered as Rogers grew in his belief that human relationships in which persons feel safe and free (*and not judged or directed*) will allow them to achieve their full potential. In contrast to both the psychoanalysts and the behaviorists, Rogers believed that people's deepest drive was for growth and self-actualization, and that they could and would choose healthy behaviors.

His work is not as talked about now as it was in the 1960's and 70's, but the conditions for effective therapy that he espoused, i.e., therapist congruence, unconditional positive regard and accurate empathy are, largely, the norm in counselor and therapist training. His approach is considered by many to take too much time; it doesn't get results in the 6-8 psychotherapy sessions covered by most insurance carriers, but his influence is undeniable.

In addition to founding person-centered therapy, he:

- ✓ Was the 1<sup>st</sup> person in history to record and publish complete cases of psychotherapy,
- ✓ Carried out and encouraged more scientific research on counseling and psychotherapy than had ever been undertaken anywhere,
- ✓ Was responsible, more than any individual, for the spread of professional counseling and psychotherapy beyond psychiatry and psychoanalysis to all the helping professions—psychology, social work, education, ministry, and others,
- ✓ Was a leader in the development of the therapy group experience,

- ✓ Was a pioneer in applying the principles of effective interpersonal communication to resolving intergroup and international conflict,
- ✓ And was one of the helping professions' most prolific writers, authoring 16 books and more than two hundred professional articles and research studies (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, eds., 1989, 3-4).

One of his most startling ideas was the notion that each individual knows what is best for her or him. We are so accustomed to consulting experts for everything from medical advice to meal preparation that we may find it difficult to believe that people don't always need "fixing." Sometimes, they really do know what's best for them, and the most helpful thing we can do is to listen to them **without judgment** and let them find their answers in their own way and time.

I'm going to read you a story by Rebecca Parker, dean of the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry in San Francisco that illustrates some of the things I've told you about Rogers. This is from her essay "Soul Music".

***At the end of WW II, Lyle Grunkenmeir came home to Iowa. His mother and sister waited for his return. The day he came home—the only veteran to return alive to that town—everyone came out to meet him. As the train pulled into the station, the band played and the mayor was there to shake his hand.***

***But as his sister later told me, the man who climbed off the train was not the lively, cheerful boy who had left for war. He was a ghost. He didn't seem to recognize anyone, not his mother, sister, or friends. In response to the crowd's rousing welcome, he stared mutely. Blank.***

***His family took him home to the farm, where he sat in the old rocking chair in the parlor. He did not speak or move and would barely eat. He continued in this state for***

***days that spilled into weeks that flowed into months. No one in this town knew about posttraumatic shock; they only knew that Lyle's soul was lost somewhere.***

***Lyle's sister, Maxine, decided to stay by him. Whenever she could, she would come and sit with him, and she would talk. She'd tell him about the church potluck: who was there, what they ate, what each young woman wore. She'd tell him about the conversations she'd overheard at the store in town, and how high the crops had grown. She told him how the wind that day had blown the clean laundry into the tomatoes. When she ran out of things to say, she would just sit with him, snapping beans, mending socks. And he sat there, silent, like a stone. Rocking.***

***One night, while Maxine was knitting quietly beside him, Lyle's eyes filled with tears. The tears spilled over and ran down his frozen face. Maxine went to her brother and put her arms around him. Held in his sister's embrace, he began to cry full force, great sobs of anguish bursting from deep inside him.***

***Then he began to talk, and he would not stop. He talked of the cold, the fear, the noise, the death of his buddies, the long marches, and then the human beings in the camps, the mass graves, the smell. He talked all night until the dawn light began to creep across the fields. Maxine listened to everything Lyle had to say. Then she went into the kitchen, and she cooked him breakfast. They ate together, and then Lyle went out and did the morning chores (Parker, 2006, 138-9).***

## **PAUSE**

So what do you hear in this story? I hear the healing power of listening and acceptance. I hear the healing power of people being themselves with each other. Maxine didn't diagnose Lyle, she didn't tell him to snap out of it nor did she wax eloquent about how she was "there for him". She simply was herself, she stayed close, and she heard all of what he had to say, without judgment, interpretation, advice-giving or commentary. And while there

are probably several more chapters to the story of Lyle's healing from his war traumas, by anyone's measure, this was a good start.

Our third principle says that we affirm and promote acceptance of one another and give encouragement to spiritual growth. Carl Rogers would say that we don't need any encouragement to grow, spiritually or otherwise. He believed that it's our inherent nature to grow and that without barriers to growth, that's precisely what humans will do—grow. It's worth our time to examine the barriers we erect to growth, but it's the quality of "acceptance of one another" that I want to focus on in the last few minutes of our time together.

Rogers taught that most of our barriers to acceptance both of self and others stem from the conditions we place for our love and approval (Newman, 2003). We often insist that people be like us, think like us, hold the same opinions we do or pursue a lifestyle similar to our own and we can express our disapproval in many, many ways, both subtle and not-so-subtle. Calling someone's idea stupid is a fairly blatant example of the non-accepting judgment that poses a barrier and makes it unsafe for that person to be their own authentic self. A little less blatant and perhaps harder to understand is a behavior that we see in our own congregation from time to time and which we often claim as part of our identity. When someone in the church community ventures an observation, how often have you seen the response to it be instant debate? People who've been part of the church for a long time often understand it as friendly repartée. However, those who are new to us, and many long term members have expressed that they don't understand the banter as friendly. They feel corrected, instructed, even disapproved of.

Psychologists Barbara and Philip Newman, in their book on human development, say "*if significant others only give approval based on meeting certain conditions, then the person learns to modify his or her behavior so that it conforms to those conditions. However, these modifications are made at the price of self-acceptance.*" Unless you know people pretty

well, it can be difficult to tell whether what feels like friendly repartée to you also feels friendly to them. It may feel aggressive and disapproving.

“On Becoming A Person” is the title of Rogers’ most famous book. His belief that people are inherently inclined towards growth reflects his own optimistic and hopeful view of the human animal. I think he would like our first principle, that we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I think he would find that acceptance of each other, exactly the way we are to be the most important thing we can do in creating happy, satisfied congregations of growing and fulfilled people. Who knows what wonders may be created by people who grow to their full potential? We have very high aspirations; people who feel accepted as they are form a pretty good basis for these aspirations.

Suppose I came up to one of you after the service and told you that I was worried about a teenaged friend of mine. Suppose this 15-year old girl I know, Corrine, was struggling at school, had just broken up with her boyfriend, walked around the house alternately screaming and sullen, said that she hated her school and everybody in it, was having trouble sleeping and got up in the middle of the night to visit websites she knew her parents disapproved of. This girl and her parents have been family friends for most of her life, so I’m really upset. What kind of response could you make that would indicate acceptance of me? Remember that advice-giving, telling me to “buck up” because teenagers are just like that, or telling me stories about your own struggles with the teenagers in your life are less likely to help me feel safe and accepted than simply recognizing that I’m stressed out.

The next time someone tells you about a difficulty they’re going through, try saying something like “Wow, that’s a lot” or “Oh, my goodness”. Then STOP TALKING and give them a chance to say whatever they need to say. Sometimes fewer words are better.

If someone says they don’t believe in God or they DO believe in God, or they think the death penalty is okay under some circumstances, or they worry that their child might be

non-normative in some way, or they're thinking of lowering their pledge, no matter what response you would have given in the past, try this one and see what happens. Look directly at the person, nod and say "Hmm". Unless you're the world's most patient person, wait a little longer for a response than you normally would. It isn't necessary for you to tell the person what you think. That may come up much later in the conversation, but for now, try waiting. Your goal for this exercise is to create a climate where they feel safe and accepted. See what happens when you just accept what somebody says without trying to fix them, improve them, correct them, or enlighten them. If what happens is a little bit of a revelation, consider this: you're becoming a person too.

Works Cited

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## ***Closing Words***

***Carl Rogers once said, "People are just as wonderful as sunsets if I can let them be... When I look at a sunset, I don't find myself saying, "Soften the orange a bit on the right hand corner"... I don't try to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds."***

