THE LIFE AND WORK
OF
CARL ROGERS
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In recent years, when friends heard I was working on Carl Rogers’ biography, they would ask, “Didn’t you do that twenty-five years ago?” Implicit in the question was a wonder about why a biography would need to be updated. Rogers died in 1987. What more was there to say?

Actually there are five answers to this question—five ways in which the present volume is substantially different from On Becoming Carl Rogers which was published by Delacorte Press in 1979. These differences tell something about the subject and the author.

First is that Rogers lived another ten years after 1977, which was when the earlier chronicle ended. This decade, when Rogers was seventy-five to eighty-five years old, turned out to be one of the most important periods in his career. It was during this time that Rogers extended his person-centered approach to helping relationships into the resolution of inter-group and international conflict. Through the Carl Rogers Peace Project and other venues he and his colleagues conducted important experiments in cross-cultural communication and peacekeeping, work for which he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. This work was not and is not widely known. Not only is it important in its own right, it puts Rogers’ historical contributions to psychology, psychotherapy and group work into a wider social and political context. Comprehending his last ten years is essential to understanding the life and work of Carl Rogers.

Secondly, we know much more about Carl Rogers now than we did before he died. By “we,” I certainly include myself, but also many of Rogers’ friends and associates. As open as Rogers was in many respects, there were some important areas of his life and career that he kept confidential, but which are revealed in his
private papers donated to the Library of Congress and other papers residing in the University of California at Santa Barbara Library. His relationships with the Central Intelligence Agency, women, alcohol, and the paranormal and spirituality, among other areas, are described in these documents, as well as interviews I conducted with close associates and relatives after Rogers’ death. They reveal a more complex and some would say more interesting character than even those familiar with Rogers would have imagined.

I have no doubt that Rogers wanted these stories to be told eventually. He said as much to me, telling me that he was glad I intended to update his biography after his death and that he was leaving papers for me to see that he was not comfortable coming to light during his lifetime. And he did leave his papers for future researchers to peruse. Natalie Rogers, his daughter and often his close colleague, had difficulty understanding why her father would preserve letters and documents that were sometimes unflattering, compromising or controversial, that might give posterity a less positive image of the man, that might tarnish his greatness in the eyes of his admirers and give ammunition to his detractors. In fact, one critical biographer of Rogers did take some of these letters out of context to present a distorted and sensationalized portrait of the man. That “outing” of Rogers alone justifies a fuller, more balanced, more nuanced understanding of Rogers’ character.

More importantly, Rogers wanted us to know him in all his complexity. I am not surprised that he left these private records for posterity. Throughout his life Rogers had a deep desire to be known, to be close to others. Yet as much as he shared himself with others—in his writings, in therapy, in encounter groups, in relationships—there were still important parts of himself that he kept private. Throughout his professional life he discouraged “Rogerians”; he did not want people to idolize or emulate him. He wanted them to trust themselves, to find their own voice. I believe he left all his papers behind for two reasons: to try one last time to share himself with us and to remind us that he was not perfect, that it would be an error to put him on a pedestal, that we need to find our own way.

A third way this edition is different from the earlier one is that we now have over a quarter century’s perspective with which to understand Rogers’ contributions to psychology, the helping professions and society. Some of his historical contributions were already clear in the 1970s, but much was in flux. Would the encounter group movement, for example, or Rogers’ concept of “the fully functioning person” and “the person of tomorrow” prove to be seminal or faddish, prescient or ephemeral? Would Rogers’ contributions to psychotherapy be of historic interest only or would they survive and influence future generations of research and practice? While some of these questions remain outstanding, it is now possible to appreciate Rogers’ work with greater historical perspective. The new, last chapter of this volume, in particular, devotes itself to an examination of what the last several decades of research and development in psychotherapy and the person-centered approach have revealed about Rogers’ legacy.
Fourth, my own relationship to the subject has matured over the past three decades. When I first approached Rogers, requesting his cooperation on writing his biography, I was a doctoral student in my mid-twenties. Although I certainly was enamored with the man and his ideas, I was never a person-centered purist. I had already developed a professional identity in other areas. Over the next seven years of researching and writing the biography, in my own thought and practice I integrated Rogers’ model with other counseling and educational approaches. I was never awed by Rogers personally. So I had a good deal of independence from my subject. (In fact, years later, a few weeks before Rogers died, he asked me to co-edit with him a collection of his writings, telling me, “I ask you because, more than any of my colleagues here, you have a greater distance from my work.”) On the other hand, because I needed his cooperation and he did not know me from Adam, I initially offered and he accepted that, in return for his cooperation on the biography (extensive interviews, access to his files, addresses of current and former colleagues, etc.) he would have final say over whether the biography would be published. I was convinced that this would not affect my work and that he would like the final product. As it turned out, after I sent him the first few chapters for factual corrections he voluntarily released me from this agreement, characteristically telling me that he had come to trust me, that he didn’t want our agreement to discourage me from being critical, and that I should put more of myself in the book. This I did, as best as I knew how to do at the time. Yet looking back almost thirty years, I recognize that I was still a relative youngster in the 1970s. Since then my own understanding of Carl Rogers, counseling and psychotherapy, education, the human condition—in a word, life—has matured. I would hope that the current edition will reflect a wiser, more balanced perspective toward my subject.

Finally, this edition is fully referenced, which the previous one was not. Actually I did have citations and references for most of the previous edition, but the publisher and I agreed not to include them in the biography. We concluded, mistakenly I think, that the book would sell better as a popular biography if it did not appear too scholarly. In retrospect, I think that decision backfired and took away from the book’s credibility and gravitas, perhaps making it seem more of an authorized biography rather than an independent and objective, sometimes critical, sometimes affectionate portrait of the man and his work. Hence the current edition includes ample endnotes and references. Hopefully, the tiny numbers in the text denoting endnotes will not distract the reader who has no interest in the source of the particular anecdote, quotation, fact or idea. At the same time, students and scholars who wish to identify or locate sources and reference materials should find this information helpful. More information on my sources, together with acknowledgements, appear at the end of the book.

In his last book, Carl Rogers wrote, “Writing is my way of communicating with a world to which, in a very real sense, I feel I do not quite belong. I wish
very much to be understood, but I don't expect to be.” That feeling of not quite belonging, which began in his childhood, remained throughout his life. Yet, in the end, I believe it is possible to know Carl Rogers. It is my hope that this volume will help fulfill his wish to be understood.

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