

CARL ROGERS'S INFLUENCE ON THE BIRTH OF MY CHILDREN

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I was interviewed by Carl Rogers in July 1983. A transcript of that audiotape session is followed by comments of both the client and the therapist. A medical case history about the author's infertility adds factual evidence to the personal consequences that followed the interview. My experience has led me to conclude that the quality of a short (25-minute) interview can provide enduring effects for the mental, emotional, and perhaps even the physical, disability of a client.

Interview by Carl Rogers (C.R.), therapist, and Beate Hofmeister (B.H.), client, in July 1983. The interview took place at a cross-cultural communication workshop in Geneva, Switzerland to demonstrate Carl Rogers's work to the participants. The workshop's topic was "Cross-Cultural Communication and the Resolution of Social Tension." During the time of the conference a new phase of international disarmament talks were being conducted in Geneva, but that ended without positive results. Carl Rogers and myself were surrounded by a semicircle of 120 participants during a large group meeting.

C.R.: Beate, I appreciate your being here [background noises].... Shut out the people, and shut out the microphone, and shut out the damn machines and I guess I will be quiet for a moment [one minute silence]. And now I think I can be with you [shuffling of feet, but more silence] and I'd be very glad to hear whatever you want to talk about.

B.H.: Yeah, I want to talk about things that are related to our workshops topic: And to me something personally very touching is the state—yeah, the state of the world—you could call it. I live in an area in Germany where the woods are about to die, the water is being contaminated, there are six atomic reactors in our ... we have a big arsenal of chemical weapons there, and—I moved out of the city in order to stay at least mentally healthy. And it ended up having phantom-fighters going over the house every day. And this really scares me very much.

C.R.: You sound very frightened and almost despaired. You are just continually in danger of technology, and arms.

B.H.: Yeah. Yeah, I feel that all of my personal life—I can manage those things. Like—I will find a way on my own. But with these fears I really, I really don't know what I can do about it. I feel it is completely out of my control and it's like a feeling—the end may come, come to pieces tomorrow or so—just by accident.

C.R.: So it is both a feeling of hopelessness and a feeling that ah—we might all be destroyed tomorrow.

B.H.: Yeah. And what am I doing, I am striving for things that I think are important to me, but also I feel: Isn't it—you know—completely—I don't know what! To strive for things while the world—maybe comes apart, may be vaporized tomorrow—just by an accident.

C.R.: Does it make any sense to try to do constructive things when we may all be blown up?

B.H.: Yeah. [pause, more slowly] Yeah—and—it makes me feel—feel suicidal. It seems so stupid to care for life in a situation like that one.

C.R.: You ask yourself: Is it really worth living under such a—such a terrible situation? It really does make you contemplate suicide.

B.H.: Yes. I really want to live and I want to build things, I want to do things, and here I am—I mean—tending my dog, because I don't want to have any children, to raise in a world like this—I mean. [Pause] It's...

C.R.: Your own desire seems so reasonable and normal and yet you feel you can't have children in this terrible world. And you are cut off from any of the constructive outcomes that you really would like.

B.H.: Yeah—I'm doing them, but—I need so much energy doing them, just to get me going again and—yeah—it seems so—the little personal world seems so—yeah, I don't know—out of perspective!—in view of those bigger political issues, when they arise.

C.R.: I'm concerned because there are two things that I want to do: I want to ask someone to let me know when 25 minutes has gone by. You will be a timekeeper? [audience: Yes!] And I also want to take off my jacket. I didn't know it would be so warm. Can you hold this for me? [Gives away the microphone to take off his jacket] I'm a little sorry for the interruption, but I do realize: Personally you are working toward constructive things, but it's like having to ... tread

water or something, to get there, so many obstacles, so much—so much potential difficulty in a way.

B.H.: You know, I think I am strong and I can do things, but this completely weakens me. I don't know how. [short pause]

C.R.: You are a strong person, but in this situation all your strength is sapped away.

B.H.: Yeah, I don't see anything I can really do about it. I mean, if I go to a politician—I don't have any trust in changing them. It is just so enormous that while trying to change it—I don't know—I mean—while driving here I had an accident, just because I was inattentive for part of a second and this might happen to the next atomic reactor or to one of those jet-people flying there, being just inattentive—and being human in a way.

C.R.: Hhm, hhm. You were human enough to let your attention stray for a minute and an accident happened. And it might happen to one of them.

B.H.: Yeah. Yeah.

C.R.: With much more disastrous results.

B.H.: Yeah. Yeah. Spoil, spoil the world—and I have tried ways of coming at it. I went to meditation—Workshops and came to face my own aggressions. But I really don't, don't have an answer and I feel completely [searching for words] ah hhm, I don't know what.

C.R.: What the hell can I do? I feel completely blocked, so to speak.

B.H.: Yeah. Yeah.

C.R.: Paralyzed.

B.H.: Just paralyzed.

Both: Paralyzed.

B.H.: And I turn around and get—do jokes, you know, just kind of get myself up again, and—but really deep down, very often I kind of do things not to feel, to feel these very underlying fears.

C.R.: So that you could lighten the surface sometimes, but down . . .

B.H.: Yeah.

C.R.: deep there are the same feelings of apprehension and hopelessness. . . .

B.H.: [silently] Yeah. [Very loud and fast:] Sometimes I think: Shouldn't I live just on a one-to-the-next-minute basis, and not plan anything, just take life from one minute, but I could not live like that. Yeah, I don't have that outlook!

C.R.: Hhm.

B.H.: I have it in my career, I—yeah. And I feel so much in need of—of emotional support and—I feel there is a need that nobody could fill. You could fill it by abolishing all those arms, but what happens is that they are putting more and more arms into Germany.

C.R.: So you feel your needs are not unreasonable or impossible. They could be met. But here it is against the context of more and more arms, and more and more destructiveness all around you.

B.H.: I, I, I think—I don't feel like ah hhm an ill person or anything, but I feel I—I'm just not made up to, to, to get along with these, with the emotional side of it. I can understand it intellectually and I can find intellectual solutions, but—I don't think—that will get me anywhere.

C.R.: It sounds to me as though you are saying: I am a healthy person, but I am in a sick situation.

B.H.: Yeah. Yeah, very sick, sick situation. The other day I heard Karl Popper giving a lecture and saying: "We are the only generation who in the whole university—in the whole universe—who can blow, blow this beautiful planet to pieces" and that really—that's very—very touching to me.

C.R.: It almost brings tears to your eyes, doesn't it? Thinking of the fact, that we might destroy this beautiful, wonderful universe. We are the first generation who can do it.

B.H.: [Crying:] I mean—just by Chance! And—I don't see a way of getting away from that. Stopping it! [Pause]

C.R.: It just fills you with tears to think of the tragedy of the—and how little you can do about it.

B.H.: [crying] I really—I just, just have to try to be strong... [crying]... destroy me. [crying]

C.R.: Saying: I can try to be strong, but to what, to what purpose?

B.H.: I'm not strong enough to—for that! I'm not strong! [crying]

C.R.: You are a strong person, but not strong enough to live in that situation!

B.H.: . . . Yeah . . . life seems to get so absurd, if I can't . . . [not understandable, said crying]

C.R.: If what?

B. H.: If I get into contact with these feelings, life just starts being absurd! [crying]

C.R.: Hhm.

B.H.: I'm not sure whether I am just cynical working with people and giving, giving hope to them and saying: Oh, you can change your life for the better, when really,—yeah, when really I see that I, I can't change it.

C.R.: When you are in your work trying to give hope to people and yet, within yourself you feel: Is there hope?

B.H.: I feel that I don't really hope, I don't have much hope for—for the world!—Yeah! And I try to, I know in my family there are some people who are busy in government things and trying to free prisoners from, from the East by buying them. And—I think, you know—it's kind of—it's trying, but it's—it's not changing anything.

C.R.: People you know, and perhaps you too, are making efforts, but will it change anything significant at all?

B.H.: Yeah, and I try to, try to make them bring others here to this workshop, because I, yeah! I had hoped of... [crying]. .just meeting someone—changing a little bit and ... [crying]... nobody seems to be interested in those human questions. They are just talking and talking [in tears] on an intellectual level, which I'm sure won't change anything.

C.R.: What you want is for people to be in touch with their feelings about it, not just talk, talk, talk about it!—And you have, had hopes that perhaps here you might find something in the way of at least steps toward change!

B.H.: Yeah, if not steps toward change at least solidarity or—you know, I mean—even being afraid together.

C.R.: Hhm. Hhm.

B.H.: Yeah, it also scares me that I find people here are always talking on these intellectual levels and I can tune into that and talk about very elaborate things, but I don't see it will change this situation at all! [in tears]

C.R.: You feel that it might be better even if we were all afraid together.

B.H.: Yeah.

C.R.: At least that would be in touch with the feelings not just the intellect.

B.H.: Yeah! I think that would at least be some support for, for a situation as helpless as that [crying]. Yeah!

C.R.: Just to know that others are as despairing and afraid as you are would be a support, somehow!

B.H.: Yeah! [pause]

C.R.: You would not feel so alone!

B.H.: Yeah!—I feel getting in touch with things again! If I think about these things, I get sort of—reality is so absurd that I, I really have to see that I get in touch with reality again. I will touch things, or at home I grab my cat or something—

C.R.: Hhm. Hhm.

B.H.: I mean just to keep me, to keep me sane.

C.R.: Hhm Hhm. Somehow have to keep your feet on the ground somehow, or touching something that's real. And I guess the thing that most likely would be... is to touch something that is real in other people, too.

B.H.: Yeah. Yeah, yeah! Get into touch with people and—I think, maybe it's a—a naive solution—but I, I really, I would deeply believe people get into touch again [crying] and ... with these really abstract things that—maybe we can make it stop then [in tears].

C.R.: You do have a belief that if people could really be in touch with each other genuinely on a deep level, that might accomplish something.

B.H.: Yeah! Yeah! I mean we'll have conflict and everything, but if we are in touch we can work it through! [tears]

C.R.: It wouldn't be smooth but it would be real.

B.H.: Yeah, yeah! And—yeah the most frightening thing—I think—is the bomber pilot driving there and dropping all these bombs, destroying everything without seeing or being in touch with it.

C.R.: Hhm, hhm.

B.H.: Or just pushing a button and killing millions of people.

C.R.: Hhm, hhm.

B.H.: . . . where you don't even have to look at what you do [crying]!

C.R.: They are all so separated from the consequences of their actions that this makes it incredibly impersonal!

B.H.: Yeah, I think the only way to stop it is really to [sighing] to get personal balance again! Like if I moved to a village in order to avoid this, this faraway thing and in this community if I go away my

neighbor says "Hello" and if I come back he will take me into his arms—now he is a completely uneducated man, I'm quite sure he is almost illiterate, but—I think he knows more about the world than all these politicians!

C. R.: One thing that comes through in almost everything you say is how much you dislike the abstract, the intellectual... so distant from the realness of people.

B.H.: Yeah. From, from, yeah from, life!

C.R.: Yeah, from life!

B.H.: I mean, life really is very simple!

C.R.: That's why you spoke on the simplicity of your neighbor: Just being real! And in touch with you.

B.H. Yeah, and give more worth to—I think we devalue those things! We devalue love, we devalue—being in doubt or just being together! Even here—I mean the people who come here are a rather entitled or privileged group, but even here we go again into trying to be intellectual, or trying to show how, how intelligent we are, or whatever, and—I really think—yeah—we are so used to, to, to go away from those . . .

C.R.: So even here you are disappointed in the—in the intellectual quality, the abstract quality of the fact that people are up in their heads.

B. H.: Yeah. I don't want to evaluate intellectual things. They are very—I, I appreciate them, but if they stop us, if they are between getting into contact, then I really resent them! And, yeah—I feel on a political level this is what brought us the atomic bomb and what brings us all these stupid talks about "Abrüstung"—about de-dearming—while everybody takes money to, to buy all the arms they can produce!

C.R.: It is just an absurdly contradictory situation, in which we—people say one thing and do the complete opposite.

B.H.: I feel I can—I can't say anything else about it—and I feel very—shaken and torn—to try to stay, not to break down.

C. R.: You... I'm sort of at the end of my rope, sort of the end of my rope and I don't see how I can go further and—I feel if I went further I might just break up, crack up!

B. H.: Yeah. Yeah, I'm also afraid that it might happen here and I, I don't want that to happen.

C.R.: You are really afraid personally, that might happen to you if you delve anymore deeply into these feelings.

B.H.: Yeah. I'm very, I'm very scared of it!

C.R.: Your feeling of fear is just deep, and real, and very present for you!

B.H.: Yeah. I've, I've had very deep, deep fears that blocked me for a while in other things. I'm—I still have, get fears in other parts of my life where I feel I can go to people who support me and I can go at those fears and—I don't always find a solution, but I won't block me and I can go on, and usually my life widens, I feel more alive, or—the older I get, the younger I feel [laughs]

C.R.: Sharing your fears . . . it does not block from expressing, makes you feel younger? better?

B.H.: Yeah, makes the world alive!

C.R.: Hhm.

B.H.: And—if I concentrate on this other side—it really is a feeling of the world coming to an end. And—in driving here we stopped by a town and saw the lake and the mountains and it was very, very—you know—just so beautiful and there was the water just next to my feet and birds being there. It was just being in harmony with . . .

C.R.: Hhm, hhm.

B.H.: Yeah, with life and with nature. And then these thoughts came, you know, the next second, I mean [crying] just glow out! Just could glow and this is it!

C.R.: There you could feel this appreciation of how beautiful our world is, and how marvelous it is.

B.H.: Yes!

C.R.: And then the thought comes: Yes, but it might be vaporized any moment

B.H.: Yes, yes.

C.R.: And it's the thoughts that are very . . .

B.H.: [Cries] I can't say anything! [very silently]—[Pause] I really want to, I really want to live, and I think I really, I have a very—I really like living [cries] it's just . . .

C.R.: It's just a plea: I, I love life, I want to live. I want to be alive!

B.H.: [crying] Yeah. Yeah. [stammering] I'm so afraid that it could be taken away at any minute.

C.R.: Life is so rich, and so full, and so marvelous, and yet, there is always that fear hanging over you.

B.H.: Yeah! It is good that you are there! It is good that you are there!

C.R.: You really appreciate being with me and being with you.

B.H.: Yeah. Yeah.

C.R.: I appreciate being with you!

B.H.: I can't say anything else.

C.R.: You've said all you can say. So here you would like to stop?

B.H.: Yeah.

Comments (immediately following the interview):

B.H.: I appreciated the opportunity of talking to you, because I know that you are a person who can be very close to somebody without grabbing at a person. And I really don't want to be grabbed, but just have somebody to be close to. It does not take away the problems but I feel, I'm being understood and that probably is enough for the next two days, or maybe longer than that—I don't know. It makes it more reachable.

C.R.: This was a very moving interview for me, because I feel, Beate is speaking for so many others and—it was very touching! And—was moved by her statement that „even if we were just afraid together“ that might be of some help. Just being human with each other, sharing our feelings, somehow takes away the edge of the despair. And—I certainly didn't plan to, and I'm sure you didn't either, to discover some easy or quick solution, but I do feel, that to me it seemed like a good relationship, an open relationship. I gradually felt more and more at ease in moving around in your world and sensing what your world is like. I guess somehow—one thing that—also was very moving to me—because I have six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren—was when you said: that you have to take care of your dog, because you didn't feel you could bring children into a world like this. That was very, very moving.

B.H.: We had lots of problems with terrorism in Germany. When I got into touch with my feelings I could understand why people become terrorists. Sometimes I am very angry, too.

C.R.: It has a lot of meaning to me, beate, that your situation is so, so awful, that you came to really understand the feelings of the terrorists: destroy!

B. H.: Yeah, change, change things, in such an absurd forceful situation, change it by force. I mean it would not be my solution. I, I, I think life is it, but also I could understand how somebody gets to such a despaired conclusion.

C.R.: You would not do it, but it did become understandable. Also she [Beate] spoke not only of the indifference of people, but of the fact that they are afraid to face their own feelings. Their own feelings are so awful that it is easier to . . . [unintelligible] it on entirely. I think that is a very real part of the situation.

B.H.: Also I can't grasp: Like in my family—Germans started two wars and—which I don't understand! In my family all the men in two generations have been killed. My father was the only survivor. And in my generation—my age group two people have killed themselves. So this is really something I don't understand, and I don't understand how a country like my country goes on, or how a country like the U.S. is going on—and not stopping it, having lived—I mean—if war had been away—but I mean we all still see them. I've had clients who were severely crippled from the Vietnam War. And nobody stops! I can't grasp that.

C.R.: It seems incredible to you that we could go through that experience time and again.

B.H.: [shortly after the workshop] For me the answer to all of this was: In such a crazy and dangerous situation the only thing that you can do is to live, to do it, try to feel how it is to live. And that's all.

The following comments were made by Carl Rogers during the Conference on the Evolution of Psychotherapy in 1985 in Phoenix, Arizona.

I held an interview with a woman in West Germany, a demonstration. I thought; "I can't be of any help to this woman." What she was describing was the fact that she lived in an area, which, first of all, was polluted by chemical plants, so she had moved away from the city. Now she found that she was in the midst of a whole lot of missile emplacements, and now the United States was going to plant more missiles right in her backyard practically, and she felt utterly hopeless. She felt sure that at any moment she might be incinerated. Her life was just one desperate hopelessness. She said she would permit herself to have a dog, because she could tolerate that. She certainly would not permit herself to have a baby because the future was too black. I didn't know how to—I was thinking during the interview: "There is not one

thing I can do about the problems she is talking about, except to understand." And so I understood as deeply as possible—as deeply as I was capable—her despair, her hopelessness, the impossibility of her situation. After the interview she said, she thought it was helpful, although I wasn't sure why.

A number of months later, nearly a year later, she wrote me to say, that it had been a remarkably helpful interview, that somehow she had never been able to get out completely her feelings. People were so struck by the desperate out quality of her situation, that they could not permit it to all come out. "If the world is not quite as bad as you think it is, oh—you ought to listen to my situation, I'm in a worse situation, there were all kinds of helpful comments," but never an understanding that went deep enough to permit her to find any sort of creative solution. She said after that interview she was able to become reconciled of the fact that all right, her situation was very bad. She was fortunate in the fact that if war came, she would almost certainly be among the first to be destroyed. She was somewhat thankful for that.

She also began to realize that there were things she could do. She joined the peace movement, she became active in that she went on with the different creative things that she was doing with her life. And at the end of the letter she said: And now I am having a baby. And last year I saw her. She is now having her second child, she has really found very creative solutions to a really desperate life situation. So that I feel: Yes, therapy does provide the nurturing situation in which creativity can emerge.

The comments below were made by Carl Rogers during the Cross-Cultural Communication Workshop, Szeged, Hungary, 1986.

We had an interview several years ago. I remember that as a very difficult interview for me, because she brought up things that I had not thought of a client bringing up. So I ask myself: "Can I be prepared for the unknown, for the unexpected, for something I didn't have any idea might come up? And can I be free of making judgments, can I hear whatever comes out and accept it as it is without making a judgment about it? And can I begin to catch the real flavor of what it is like to be my client at this moment? And can I accept the fact that almost certainly in the beginning I will make mistakes?" I will not understand quite correctly. Because I like to be able to accept the fact that I may make mistakes and then correct myself to get in real tune with the client. And not to be critical with myself if I do have a little difficulty in understanding just the exact meaning. And I guess the main thing I ask

myself is: "Can I let myself go and really enter into this other person's world, just as this world exists for him or her." And then one other thing occurs to me: This is only going to be a very brief interview of 15 minutes. "Can I be prepared for the fact that perhaps not much will happen, and also be prepared for the fact that sometimes in 15 minutes very significant things happen. In other words: I just want to be the maximum of flexibility and openness to whatever comes forth."

Medical History of My Infertility and Personal Consequences That Followed the Interview

At age 14 I had begun to menstruate, but never was able to reach a periodical cycle. During my teens I found it quite comfortable that I did not bleed. I traveled around the world for six weeks to three months each year during that time and attributed the irregularities to that and also to my youth. At age 19 I became sexually active and began to take the pill for birth control. For the next 12 years without intermission I used a low-hormone pill. During these years my husband and I did not want children of our own and were agreed that in the world as we experienced it, we would adopt children if we felt the wish to educate and live with children.

When we moved to the countryside our life situation and attitude changed in a way that we both hoped to have children. For the next three years my reproductive functions could not be stimulated and finally my gynecologist referred me to a university where hormone treatment was suggested for my infertility. I took the medication at home and was informed about the necessary medical compliance, which meant to have sex according to a schedule. As a result, a multiple pregnancy was to be expected. I did not want to give birth to five children at once and I could not imagine being involved sexually without being emotionally ready. I felt that there is no use in forcing my body into something she does not want to do naturally. (I prefer to refer to my body as "she" because "it" reduces the awareness of my femininity.) My husband supported me and was content to live without children as we had done for the last 14 years.

Philosophically, I thought that not anything that can be done has to be done, and that I would have to dispense with my hope for gestation. I felt quite alone in the sadness and mourning for my unborn child or children. At the same time, I did want to understand the meaning of what my body wanted to teach me. I understood that I had to get into better contact with it and started my own program, which included concentration, relaxation, and meditation and some of the methods outlined by Simonton, using imagery of my body and its functions. I did not do this to become fertile, but to learn more about myself. Two times

each day for about 15 minutes I would take time for myself, lie down and do the exercise I had prescribed for myself in my mind. After a while I could locate my inner organs and became aware of the fact that blood pressure and temperature were too low in my inner sexual organs. I enjoyed influencing these parts and felt fresh, active, and healthy any time I had been through my be-good-to-yourself time. I am quite aware of the fact that there was no scientific medical explanation for this or the following, but that did not bother me at all.

At the time of the interview with Carl this had all happened. I felt in good contact with my body, she had become my friend. In the interview with Carl I felt deeply understood, but I would not have dreamed that it might have any influence on my physical condition. Intellectually I was very astonished that there might be any connections between my infertility and my desperation about the world situation and my fear of the future. After the workshop I wanted to understand more fully and mentally what had happened in that short period of having another person be with me. I listened to the audiotape, tried to analyze it, and found some concluding sentences that were important: A new generation, with our support, can change the world. We will change the world by investing ourselves in this new generation. I will do for life what I can in my personal life. This will influence others. Very slowly the future did not seem so black. I felt supported in knowing that there is a network of persons who do want constructive changes and work for them. I do not attribute it to chance that my daughter was born 11 months after the interview. Since there was no menstruation, the time of her conception remains unknown. (I was surprised and happy when I—in addition to my subjective feeling—received proof of my pregnancy.) The pregnancy and birth all were quite natural. I was very astonished when, after her birth, some of the participants of the Geneva workshop asked me whether I attributed her birth to that interview. Not knowing the specific background they must have had an intuitive understanding of the impact of that interaction. I am also very thankful that 18 months after my daughter's birth I bore a son. I hope I will be blessed with a third child. They are my hope and my investment in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

A short 25-minute interview that provided the person-centered conditions for growth had an enduring effect on my outlook for the future and the accompanying cognitions. I knew about all the behavioral

methods and techniques to change the perception of a depressive (which I don't consider myself to be). My cognitions began to change when I felt fully understood and accepted my reality. Emotionally the despair is gone today. I enjoy the growth of my children and my growing with them. I hope those dark sides of living in the 1980s can be changed toward a more constructive way of being more human, more natural, more earthy. I just do the best I can.

There is no external proof that my theory is right, that this interview helped me to overcome my infertility or changed my physical disability, but also it is not refutable. I thank Carl for my babies.