

Reflections on the Human Potential Movement: *An Interview with William Coulson*

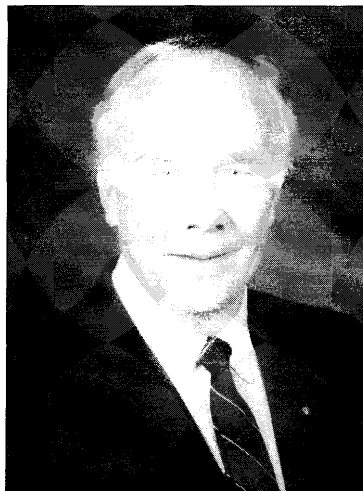
by Linda Ames Nicolosi

William Coulson, Ph.D. was a close colleague of psychologist and author Carl Rogers. Rogers was one of the three founders of the "Human Potential Movement" of the 1960's.

Dr. Coulson served for many years as researcher at Rogers' Western Behavioral Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California. By the early 1970's, however, Dr. Coulson had begun to question the value system inherent in the Human Potential Movement. It was an approach to psychology that eventually transformed the culture.

The Human Potential Movement set the stage for—among other things—the sexual revolution, the redefinition of the family, values-clarification programs in education, a "therapeutic" movement which transformed many established religions, and the normalization of homosexuality.

Coulson eventually repudiated the movement, and the reasons why are described in this interview, which we first published in a NARTH Bulletin several years ago.



William Coulson, Ph.D.

What went wrong with the humanistic movement of the 1960's?

Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Rollo May taught that the most important source of authority is within you, and that you must listen to yourself. They created the theory of self-actualization, in which unstinting satisfaction of desires--bodily or otherwise--was implicit.

But all the questioning encouraged by the humanistic movement leads us down a path toward infidelity, and when that happens, you can kiss civilization goodbye. Civil and public health depend upon faithful, monogamous marriage.

Don Clark wrote a revealing article in 1973 for *The Humanist*. He said those of us who are denying our bisexual capacity are probably listening to ourselves with one ear. I think he's right--if everyone were honest about their sexuality they'd probably be bisexual--in fact, they'd be sexual toward anything and everything. I think it's better *not* to be so honest.

How did the Human Potential Movement affect our social philosophy?

It had a very strong effect. We now have a misapprehension of the demands of social justice. We believe that justice demands that nobody be condemned for anything. We've decided that one belief is as good as another, and everyone has the right to say for himself, "That's right for *me*."

In the human potential movement, you prove your personhood by having sex in as unconstrained and uncivilized a way as possible. It's, "I'll have what I want, when I want it."

It's very much like the little girl in the children's novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, who says, "I want it Daddy, and I want it now!" That's a good description of San Francisco's gay district--Castro Street--in the 1980's.

In what ways has sexual liberation hurt us?

Experience should persuade us that the sexual liberation laid out for us in the 1960's is species-threatening. It leads to unlimited sensual gratification. Our children deserve better.

How did Rogers figure in this movement?

Rogers wanted to explore the outer limits of therapeutic inquiry. But he betrayed his vocation as a psychologist because he came to the conclusion that there *should be no such thing* as a therapist. In fact, he even changed the name of his work from "client-centered therapy" to "person-centered approach." With this approach the therapist disappeared, all authority disappeared and all limits disappeared.

Rogers' work in the 1970's, I think, was in part a defense of his own daughter Natalie's conduct. She had enrolled with

Maslow to get a master's degree and was bitten by the self-actualization bug. She left her husband and three children to, as she said, "become a real person." Her father's and Maslow's philosophy of self-fascination had persuaded her that marriage and motherhood weren't good enough.

Rogers wrote a series of defenses of alternative relationships, including homosexuality, defending the freedom to be sexually experimental. He writes about people who had engaged in what would once be called, as he put it, "living in sin, committing adultery, lewd and lascivious conduct, fornication, homosexuality, ingesting illegal drugs, even soliciting" but who did so "in their struggles for a better partnership." He said, "We as a culture can relieve them of the ever-present shadow of moral reproach..."...implying the belief that if we will only take away the penalty, we can wipe out any culpability.

In essence, he took behaviors which had for thousands of years been considered destructive to society, and reframed them as representing progress.

One of Rogers' granddaughters is a well-known lesbian activist. Rogers created a theory which his daughter and granddaughter set out to fulfill.

How was Rogers' work appropriate to the times?

Rogers' books gave voice to something that was already brewing in the culture at that time.

In his 1961 book, *On Becoming a Person*, he wrote a chapter called, "To Be That Self Which One Truly Is." This gave voice to a fundamental argument of today's gay-rights movement--the idea that one "truly is" homosexual.

Rogers' voice carried great authority. He was a onetime American Psychological Association president, and he received the APA's first Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award. He was a weighty authority, and he wrote persuasively. Behavior that would have been confronted by the previous generation as shameful now became obligatory--according to Rogers' creed, "One must be that self which one truly is."

Did Rogers intend for the Human Potential Movement to go in such an extreme direction?

I think Rogers was carried along by all the fan mail he'd get from college students--letters like, "It's because of your writings that I'm now free." Some of his readers would read encouragement for sexual license into his work, and later Rogers gave them more ammunition by writing more explicitly about sexual license.

Did Rogers actively encourage such license in his encounter groups?

As long as Rogers and those who feared his judgment were there it was okay, because nobody fooled around in the presence of Carl Rogers. He kept people in line. He was a moral force. Rogers didn't get people involved in sex games, but he couldn't prevent his followers from doing it, because all he could say was, "Well, I don't do that." They'd say, "Well, of course *you* don't do that, because you grew up in an earlier era; but *we* do, and it's marvelous. You have set us free to be ourselves."

But Rogers was himself a relatively traditional person?

His background was fundamentalist Protestantism, and he was once a seminarian. He may have found the behavior of some of his followers morally repellent, but as a therapist he believed his job was to help people find themselves. If he had just stopped at that--after all, "coming home to oneself" is what happens at the hands of a good therapist--but many people, including his own daughter, read too much into his good intentions and decided to "free themselves." The most destructive form of that freedom was usually sexual.

Of course, Rogers also believed he owed it to himself to become an individual, and his younger followers eventually persuaded him that he wasn't following his own ideas. He decided he had to cheat on his wife to be real. During the last seven years of her life, his wife Helen was bedridden, and Rogers admits he became romantically involved with some of the young women in his encounter groups. He says these involvements were platonic, and I believe him, but at any rate, they were inappropriate. Not only did he write about allowing himself to love other women, but in *A Way of Being* he felt obliged, for openness' sake, to tell the world he wasn't sure he still loved his wife.

Did Rogers fulfill the original mission of the human potential movement?

He fulfilled the lower part of the mission, but he betrayed the higher part.

Rogers did have some serious doubts. He wrote one very telling chapter in the 1983 revision of his earlier 1969 book, *Freedom to Learn*. This was four years before he died. He called this chapter, "A Pattern of Failure." In it he described disastrous projects like the breakup--through misguided encounter groups--of the Catholic community of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Rogers wrote honestly about those tragedies, although he did blame much of those failures on other people.

That revision of *Freedom to Learn* didn't sell very well, and

when the book was published again after Rogers' death, the self-reflective chapter was removed--tragically, I think--by the editors.

Did Rogers have a change of heart before he died?

Perhaps on one level he saw what was wrong, but on another level, I believe he really couldn't afford to see it.

What about one of the other leaders of the movement, Abraham Maslow?

Many people think Maslow was an unreconstructed human potentialist, but he did express a lot of regrets at the end of his career. Part of Maslow's story may never be told. In fact, he burned some of his most intimate papers while he was in Ohio awaiting the birth of his first grandchild in September of 1968.

To pass the time, he went to the Ohio State Fair where he was greatly impressed by the young midwestern farm people who, instead of rejecting all authority and experience, were following in their parents' ways. While he was in Ohio he was also deeply moved by reading *The Chosen*, a novel by Haim Potok, about two families, one Hasidic, one conservative, in which both sons were being steered toward the rabbinate. Maslow was born a Jew, but he had proclaimed his atheism loud and clear his whole life. In fact when he was a boy, he had jumped up during his Bar Mitzvah and run out of the temple when it was his turn to read from the Torah.

Yet in his journals, Maslow wrote that he cried and got drunk the night he finished the book. I suspect he may have been asking himself at that time, ""What if everything in my life has been wrong? What if I've hit the bull's eye of profligacy rather than integrity?"

Perhaps he had had a revelation like Tolstoy's character in "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," because he had already begun to see what had gone wrong with the human potential movement.

But why would he have burned part of his journals?

I speculate he might have feared he had misled people. He had seen his own theories backfire. He believed that his granddaughter's quality of life was threatened.

Toward the end of his life, he began to urge his students to think less about their self-actualization and personal identity, and more about self-forgetting. Thirty years after writing a paper on the virtues of monkey behavior, he had begun to see individuals acting like monkeys in the name of self-actualization.

In later life, he wrote in his journals about his previously mistaken view of "the sacred impulse." He concluded, "My unconscious is not the boss, my impulse is not sacred and irrefutable." He condemned Carl Rogers' idea that we should follow our feelings whether they were right or wrong. Maslow had caught on to the fact that this idea of the human potential movement was a civilization-destroying concept. It failed to understand the reality of evil in human life. When we implied to people that they could trust their impulses, they also understood us to mean that they could trust their evil impulses...and that if they trusted them, they wouldn't turn out to be evil.

What did Maslow say about homosexuality?

Not much specifically, although he did make statements like, "The gay life is anything but 'gay.'" However Maslow was very clear in saying that the *real* growth center for human beings is "the authentic family--male, female, mother, father, love, parenthood, joint childbirth."

You've talked about the dangers of psychotherapy.

Actually, the problem is "TMP"--"Too Much Psychology." Psychotherapy according to Rogers' theory requires that the therapist practice acceptance, understanding and permissiveness. Those qualities often exceed their rightful parameters.

What about the 1973 decision to de-pathologize homosexuality?

I can understand that decision if you think of it in terms of Thomas Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness*. Homosexuality is more a form of moral distress, than of mental illness. In fact, most problems referred to psychologists today are moral problems, rather than than mental-health problems. People who come to therapy sometimes *need* to hear advice like, "You can't do that." They need to hear talk of moral absolutes.

The fundamental problem, however, is not changing the diagnosis of homosexuality, but putting our beliefs about the *scope* of psychotherapy on hold until we can get our thinking straightened out. Psychology has been called upon to substitute for all morality, and that is simply too much to ask.

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