



# Expressive Therapy

## CREATIVITY AS A PATH TO PEACE

*A conversation with  
Natalie Rogers*

Interviewed by MICHAEL TOMS

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**N**atalie Rogers, daughter of ground-breaking psychotherapist Carl Rogers, is a therapist in her own right and a leading proponent of the new and growing field of Expressive Arts therapy. Married just after college, Natalie was for years the supportive wife of a university professor and mother of three daughters until the need to be more than a husband's appendage changed her life. She has written the moving story of her painful and ecstatic journey to a new life and identity in her book, *Emerging Woman: A Decade of Midlife Transitions*. The book has been translated into five languages.

Three years ago Natalie, with her daughter Frances Fuchs, founded the Person Centered Expressive Therapy Institute based in Santa Rosa, California. Under Natalie's guidance, the Institute conducts an international program of workshops and trainings in the experience and applications of expressive arts therapy.

In a recent interview with Michael Toms of New Dimensions Radio, Natalie spoke about her work with expressive therapy and about the power and beauty that attend the release of the creative spirit.

**MT:** How does someone who has engaged in psychotherapy for years, as you have, become interested in the creative process?

**NR:** Well, I really believe that the motivating factor for psychotherapy, which is the impulse toward self-actualization, is the same thing as the creative force. I'm interested in the creative process because I am creative and I come from a creative family.

**MT:** So you think creativity should be a natural part of our lives?

**NR:** Yes, definitely. After we've resolved our problems, there's a whole bounty and richness that we have available to us.

**MT:** So its like focusing on the good rather than the bad?

**NR:** That's right. For me it has brought all the threads of my life together. I'm a writer, sometimes an artist, and I like doing movement. So as a psychotherapist I started using all of these creative/expressive methods to bring into my work what I experienced as being growth-promoting in my life.

**MT:** Most of us probably relate to the psychotherapy process as one that we go to if we have problems, but I don't think we often associate psychotherapy with becoming more creative. And you're suggesting it's quite possible.

**NR:** I think psychotherapy does allow us to tap into the deep well of our unconscious, which is the wellspring of self-expression and creativity.

**MT:** In our society, when we talk about the unconscious, it seems to be this place that we cover over and don't talk about. It is sometimes expressed with the kind of violence we see on television. I think underneath we have a basic fear of opening the door to the unconscious because all the demons and devils are going to escape, and we worry about getting the lid back on.

**NR:** Yes, my work in the Institute is to create a safe environment where all the parts of the unconscious can be explored in ways that are not threatening. And, of course, the unconscious is not just the demons and the devils. It's also the goddesses and the ecstasy and all of our beauty. So when we put a lid on the dark side, we are also putting a lid on our potential for the beautiful, the ecstatic, and the glorious.

**MT:** We cover up our joy just as much as our anger.

**NR:** Absolutely. We tighten and inhibit ourselves in all ways. So to really find our



*Masako Shinamura and Svend Anderson working with clay.*

full potential we have to be courageous to tap into that unknown. My work is about integrating the mind, the body, the emotions, and the spirit in order to create a universal and global change.

**MT:** Why do you think there is a relationship between the individual and the global?

**NR:** In my own experience when I have delved into my unconscious and become creative, it's both an opening and a healing process. When I open to myself, then I am receptive to what I call the "collective unconscious" or the "universal spirit." Some people call it the Christ spirit. Whatever religious or spiritual background you come from, it doesn't matter. I have felt it as an energy field. We often feel this in a group when we are using the creative process. This changes our own individual consciousness and changes what we believe and what we actively do in the world.

**MT:** How does becoming more creative relate to the world situation?

**NR:** First, the arts are a revolutionary force. Making art, in any form, transforms the creator. Making art is part of the life force. Dictators know the power of the creative act and therefore control or prohibit the life-enhancing creative process.

Secondly, these symbolic, nonverbal, mythic expressions that flow out of expressive arts are cross-cultural. I have

traveled around the globe doing workshops and I find that when creative self-expression comes from very deep within, all boundaries disappear. It is a cross-cultural link, a link of understanding. We find out we are all human; we find that we all have a dark side and a bright side, and we all have hopes and aspirations.

**MT:** What is person-centered therapy?

**NR:** My father, Carl Rogers, developed client-centered therapy in working with individuals in a therapeutic relationship. We dropped the word "client" when we broadened the applications of this philosophy to other types of relationships: parent-child, teacher-student, and management-employee relationships, for instance. The person-centered approach is the philosophy that each individual has the inner wisdom to follow his or her own right path. This is differentiated from the medical model of therapy, which assumes that the therapist has the answer to the client's problem. In person-centered therapy, the therapist creates a safe environment that allows the individual to discover his or her own inner truth and direction. To do this, the therapist brings to the relationship a state of presence that is empathic, genuine, and totally accepting of the client.

**MT:** How did you then make the leap to using the expressive arts in therapy?

**NR:** All of this evolved out of workshops Dad and I did together in 1974. They were basically verbal experiences, and I found myself getting antsy sitting in my chair. I am a very kinesthetic person. I've practiced yoga for years and I'm an artist, so I created studio spaces within these ten-day, person-centered workshops. The studio spaces were like free play. We could turn on the music and dance or do art work.

What I discovered was that when we use our bodies in movement, it changes our art work; and when we express ourselves in color or clay, it changes our writing. One art actually nurtures the other. I call it the "creative connection." I have found very little written on this subject except by Anais Nin, who said that when she went from dance to writing, it enhanced her writing. I don't think too many people understand this principle since they may be either a writer or an artist. What I'm trying to do is gather writers, artists, musicians, therapists, medical people, people on the spiritual path, all sorts of people together to nurture the other aspects of themselves in this very profoundly creative way.

**MT:** How did you start doing this work?

**NR:** It evolved from my childhood because, at a very young age, I loved to move to any music that had great depth of feeling. I would go into the living room where my parents would be reading and I'd put on some music and say, "Please don't watch me." So I would dance, and it would be like having the music flow through me. It was expressive movement. I loved that way of expressing my moods and feelings. Then I became too tall, I thought, to be a dancer so I went on to other things.

It wasn't until age 40 that I came back to dance. I had moved from Boston to California and enrolled in Anna Halprin's Dancers' Workshop trainings. For me, expression with my body was very opening, freeing, enlivening, enriching. At the same time, I was training in art therapy with Janie Rhyne, so when I went to Anna's studio I took my art journal and created quick art work there. This is how I discovered that movement changed the expressiveness and vitality of my art work.

Also, my mother, Helen Rogers, was a fine artist, and I grew up in a family that engaged in art as well as psychotherapy. My mother always created environments for my brother and me to work expressively in art. I feel very privileged for having had all of that and want to pass along to others the whole environment of safety and nonjudgment. I've found that we need to be able to drop the harsh judg-

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**ABOVE:** Bodil Labelle enacts an inner journey as Janelle Gochenour observes.

**LEFT:** Natalie Rogers leads group participants around "The World" drawing.



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ments we place on ourselves. We are all creative.

There's this mystique that creativity has to do only with talented or gifted people. I don't believe that at all. We start as children being very naturally creative and then, because teachers or parents judge us or grade our art work or our dance or our writing, we pull in and say "I'm no good." So in my work I create a loving, nurturing, supportive environment. One way I help people toss that little judge off their shoulder is to have them focus inward on their feelings and draw with their non-dominant hand. Then they can say to themselves, "If I'm going to use my non-dominant hand, I don't have any control." They feel free to go with whatever comes out. It enables them to tap into their right brain and be spontaneous.

I want to emphasize here that creativity is a healing process and that it does not

have to result in an aesthetic product. We can also use the creative process in relationships or problem solving.

I'd like to come back to your question about the dark side of ourselves and how we can handle that. To dance or draw our demons or express them in improvisational theatre releases that energy in a positive, even playful, way so that we can say, "Oh, so that's my monster. I can own that part of myself." Part of changing global consciousness is finding a way to accept that part of ourselves. We need to understand that there is a violent part in every one of us and to find appropriate ways to release, vent, and channel that energy. To paint a picture of rage, or to dance sorrow, heals that aspect of ourselves. We become fully accepting of ourselves and therefore accepting of others. Carl Jung wrote, "One does not become enlightened by imaging figures of light but by making the darkness conscious."

Another aspect of this is that we are in such a linear, high-technology society that we need to become acquainted with our intuitive, feminine side to balance ourselves. These methods can be applied in corporations and business and industry very easily.

The other day I worked with a staff of five people from a dynamic company. They wanted to explore the future expansion of the business. We did some movement to get people to play together and know each other at a non-verbal level. Then I guided them in imagery and visualizations on paper. We asked, "What are the possibilities for the business? Be outrageous." Wow, the ideas and the electricity that came forth were just dynamite! So they used their playful and feminine capacities to problem-solve and envision the future.

It's interesting that so many of the participants in our training program from

*Adele Fagon and Mukti Khanna write down their thoughts after a morning of dancing and creating.*



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around the world are women. I'm saying, "Men, we need you. We need your power to match ours. We want to reach out to you to join us and discover your own creative free spirit—your intuitive, non-linear side."

**MT:** What comes to me as you say that is, look at all the men sitting around the tables in Geneva discussing disarmament, and all of the men in the White House and Congress making decisions. If they opened themselves the way you are describing, there would be a loss of control.

**NR:** Yes, and what would happen to those decisionmakers is that they would open to their own feelings of pain and potential loss. If they connected their personal pain, the possibility of actually losing their wives, children, and grandchildren when the missiles they advocate go off, then I think the situation would change. I've often thought that people at the negotiating table should bring photos of their spouses and children to the conference.

**MT:** Better yet, bring them along.

**NR:** Yes, that's a great idea. The linear, technological side of us is so overdeveloped and our creative, visionary, intuitive side is so underdeveloped, particularly in American and Western European culture, that unless we balance ourselves we are in real trouble.

**MT:** What are some of the other ways your work can be applied?

**NR:** I'm really excited about using this in drug and alcohol treatment centers. One thing needed by the addicted person is to come to an understanding of who he or she could be when not dependent on these substances. These methods give

people a vision, a sense of their own potential. Also, as I see it, a lot of substance abuse comes out of people holding back their creativity.

**MT:** And if we keep our creativity bottled up, it will probably emerge in ways that are very destructive.

**NR:** Right. The creative force is a beautiful, energizing force, but we do have to channel it and we need to learn how.

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*Natalie Rogers, M.A., Certified Expressive Therapist, is founder and director of the Person Centered Expressive Therapy Institute. She is an internationally known group facilitator trained in client-centered therapy, art therapy, and movement. She has worked as a psychotherapist in community clinics, a college counseling center, and a psychiatric hospital. She is author of Emerging Woman, now published in five languages. Mary McClary is a writer, counselor, and learner in the Person Centered Expressive Therapy Institute training program.*

For further information on the Person Centered Expressive Therapy Training and/or a taped copy of the original unedited interview as broadcast on New Dimensions Radio (\$10.95 which includes postage, California residents add \$ .57 for sales tax), write or call the Institute at 1515 Riebli Road, Santa Rosa, CA 95404, (707) 523-0203. For a catalogue of tapes, write New Dimensions Radio, P.O. Box 410510, San Francisco, CA 94141, (415) 563-8899.