
ROLLO MAY: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND APPRECIATION

James F. T. Bugental

In this moving personal tribute, James Bugental looks back at his long and fruitful association with America's premier existential psychologist—Rollo May.

A few months ago I sat in Rollo May's living room with a small group of therapists and counselors who were the Fellows of the Mentorship in Existential Humanistic Psychotherapy which I was conducting for the Humanistic Psychology Institute.* As the lively talk flowed around the room, I pulled back just a bit to watch the eager faces of the students and the matchingly eager face of our distinguished host. I was moved by his delight in discussion, in the flow of ideas, and in the involvement of the varied people in the room. How typical of Rollo was this readiness to engage in good talk with all comers—so long as they were seriously trying to explore and learn. There was no awkward chasm between this world-famed authority and these animated and bright neophytes; rather they were all caught up in the wonder of emerging understanding—Rollo evoking, teaching, and gently admonishing; the fellows seeing further possibilities, discovering fresh insights, and responding to the challenge of rich knowledge and much thought.

As I watched the scene, I found a shifting succession of images and feelings playing on my inner screen: satisfaction on seeing *destiny* in a fresh way through Rollo's

Source: From Saybrook Institute *Perspectives*, special issue; "Rollo May: Man and Philosopher" (L. Conti, ed.), 2(1), Summer 1981.

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understanding, envy of his erudition, enjoyment in watching my students meaningfully engage with him, stimulation to think further about the meaning of choice in individual lives, and warm recollection of the many times that Rollo May impacted my own thinking, my career, and my grappling to understand the human situation.

In 1953 I resigned from the UCLA psychology faculty to devote full time to private practice, drawn by the challenges and rewards of working with "real people." That same year—although I did not see it until the next—Rollo published *Man's Search for Himself*, a book that spoke to many of my own inner questionings. Meantime Alvin Lasko, who had taught with me at UCLA, and I founded Psychological Service Associates and began a staff development program which included a variety of further learning experiences among which was the reading of Rollo's book.

For a decade, I tried to match my learnings from graduate school, from my own teaching career, and from these staff seminars with the so very real lives of the people who were coming to see me. Sometimes the matches were successful; often times they left me dissatisfied. The richness and complexity of the lived lives seemed always to go beyond what I was learning, and the procedures and theories in which I had been trained felt as though they were designed for another and simpler species (probably college sophomores or white rats).

Then in 1958 the Los Angeles Society of Clinical Psychologists asked me to chair a committee to develop postdoctoral training opportunities. (At that time there were none on the West Coast, although the East had a variety.) So we brought a variety of distinguished contributors to conduct workshops for us: George A. Kelly, Emanuel Schwartz, Rudolf Ekstein, and—of course and especially—Rollo May.

This was at about the time of Dr. May's landmark book, *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*, which he edited (with Ernest Angel and Henry Ellenberger) and for which he wrote two principal chapters. His presentations at that weekend workshop and in those two chapters exploded on me as a major emotional and professional experience: I had found someone who really knew about the unfamiliar territory into which my patients (not "clients" in those days) were taking me. Here was someone who could name, describe, and confirm the phenomena that my training had only vaguely known existed. With this perspective, and borrowing frequently from May's wisdom and experience, I began to articulate what I'd been grappling with and to advance more satisfyingly in the endless work of trying to understand our human condition more deeply and more fully. From then on, I wrote out of my experience rather than solely in the cognitive style I had used before.

Over the subsequent years I took pride in keeping contact with Rollo May. When my first book was readying for the publisher, I asked him to read it. Graciously, he did so and offered several helpful suggestions. One which I recall had to do with the subtitle: at his gentle urging I changed "The Existential-Analytic Approach to Psychotherapy" to "An. . . ." In the meantime, Rollo himself was becoming one of the best known of American psychologists. His picture and his opinions were to be seen in many of the media.

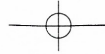
After several publications which have remained central to the basic library of existential psychotherapy, Rollo began a series of monumental contributions to the understanding and description of human experience. These books establish his preeminence among psychological observers. Beginning with *Love and Will*, continuing with *Power and Innocence*, *The Courage to Create*, and the revision of his powerful *The Meaning of Anxiety* (originally his doctoral dissertation), and shortly to be joined by *Freedom and Destiny*, on which he is currently working, Rollo May has drawn careful, scholarly, and notably important portraits of some of the main dimensions of our lives. Somehow he manages to do so while remaining eminently readable, a fact attested to by the best-seller status of *Love and Will*—an astonishing phenomenon for a book as scholarly as it is.

Although Rollo May has published significant works on a variety of topics, I believe his lasting contribution will be judged, in the long run, to be this remarkable series of studies of basic human experiences which have emerged from his mature years. These five books—one hopes that the number will be increased—are the product of his broad, scholarly foundation and his extensive clinical experience. In them he has set forth an integrated set of concepts which provide a language, a dynamic schema, and an inspiring vision of those issues which are at the very core of the human venture: love, will, power, creativity, courage, anxiety, destiny, intentionality, violence—to name only a small part of the vocabulary of life which he has undertaken to spell out.

It is an all too familiar observation that humanistic psychology has been clearer about what it opposes than about what it proposes. The corollary is that the contributions of the third force have been rich in originality, enthusiasm, and promise, but for the most part, they have been equally scattered, incomplete, and shallowly grounded in sophisticated scholarship. Thus the work of humanistic psychologists is an easy target for critics, and the additions to knowledge they offer have been more potential than actual. Rollo May's work is in high contrast to that state of affairs. The body of work which is emerging from his mind and pen is coherent, fertile, and firmly rooted in the highest tradition of learning.

We who are close to the man and his times seldom have sufficient perspective to recognize what a sharp difference there is between May's carefully wrought conceptions in the network of their interrelations and so much else that is appearing on superficially similar topics. Only the passage of time will demonstrate how deeply these two streams of thinking diverge. I feel confident that when students and teachers have had more time to digest the body of work and when researchers have begun to develop the edifice of thought that is set forth, then Rollo May's true gift to psychology and to human beings will stand out clearly.

Thinking about the passage of time recalls to me my personal favorite among Rollo May's books: I am especially fond of Rollo's *The Courage to Create* for he gave me a copy when it was just newly off the presses. The occasion was my sixtieth birthday celebration, and he wrote on the flyleaf a familiar and loved quotation from Browning's *Rabbi ben Ezra*, "The best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was made," to which he added words I cherish, "Best regards for the second half of a creative life" (emphasis in the original). Thus I hope for 120 years of productivity. I



shall certainly need them if I hope to come to anything like the creative courage and productivity of Rollo himself.

Following are two tributes to maverick existential psychiatrist R. D. Laing. The first is a personal commentary by Kirk Schneider; the second is a poem by *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* editor Tom Greening. Both commemorate Laing's groundbreaking investigations of freedom, politics, and madness.

R. D. LAING REMEMBERED

Kirk J. Schneider

Once people believed that the world was flat; however, science has proved that the world is round. . . . Now in spite of that, one still believes that life is flat and goes from birth to death. However, life is probably round and much superior in extension and capacity to the hemisphere known to us at present. Future generations will probably enlighten us on this so interesting subject; and then science itself might arrive—willy-nilly—at conclusions . . . relating to the other half of existence.

—VINCENT VAN GOGH (quoted in Graetz, 1963, p. 71)

We respect the voyager, the explorer, the climber, the spaceman. It makes far more sense to me as a valid project—indeed, as a desperately and urgently required project for our time—to explore the inner space and time of consciousness.

—R. D. LAING, 1967, p. 127

It was June 15th, 1976. I was 19 years old and about to embark on the journey of my life. Starry-eyed, backpack in hand, I wandered about a bookstore at New York's Kennedy Airport.

Suddenly, I spotted a tiny blue book. The title jumped out at me—*The Divided Self* (Laing, 1969a). "What a moving phrase," I thought to myself, "what a disturbing phrase." When I opened the cover I was no less captivated. I read and kept on reading. I read as the time of my flight drew near. I read as I moved through the jetway. I read and took furious notes throughout my entire seven-hour flight. When I finished I wrote the following inscription:

Author's note: This article conveys some of my thoughts, feelings, and experiences with R. D. Laing. Although I met him only briefly and did not know him personally, I sympathize greatly with his concerns.

Source: This selection by Kirk Schneider and the poem on page 108 by Thomas Greening from *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 30 (2), Spring 1990, pages 38–43.

