

# The Story of a Repentant Psychologist

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In the following interview with Dr. William Marra, Dr. William Coulson discusses his role in the destruction of Catholic religious orders, and his subsequent change of mind.

TLM: The story begins with your graduate education, doesn't it?

COULSON: Oh, yes. I went to Notre Dame in the late 50's, for a doctorate in philosophy, and wrote my dissertation on Carl Rogers' theory of human nature. There was an interesting controversy at the time, about, whether Rogers, who was probably the most prominent American psychologist of his day, believed that every man is totally good. So I wanted to compare Rogers with B.F. Skinner, the famous behaviorist, and with Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis.

Stop right there. Were you a Catholic at the time?

Oh, yes.

And Notre Dame was Catholic?

Notre Dame was Catholic! I got a good education in Thomistic philosophy.

Didn't it occur to you that as a faithful Catholic you couldn't buy the idea that men are basically good? Didn't original sin mean anything to you?

It wasn't my task then to be a critic of Rogers' theory. I wanted to find out what he taught; and having read everything that I could get my hands on, I contacted him at the University of Wisconsin.

I see; okay.

At the time Rogers was at the University of Wisconsin Psychiatric Institute. He had gotten a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, to test his theory of nondirective counseling.

Now put that in plain English.

Okay. At the University of Chicago, where Rogers had done his most significant work, he had found that young people he was counseling didn't really need him to give them answers - that they had answers within them. In retrospect, I understand that these were bright, well-brought-up young people, or they couldn't have gotten into the University of Chicago. They were able to figure things out, but they hadn't been able to hear themselves think, so responsive had they always been to people telling them what they should do.

So Rogers had the idea that to help these neurotics, we should refer them to the source of authority within them - in other words, refer them to their consciences. Notice the assumption that in fact people have consciences! Well, he was dealing with University of Chicago students in the 40's and 50's, who had grown up in the Midwest; and, sure enough, they had consciences.

- and therefore it would make sense for a therapist to say, "Well, what do you think? Use your own basic convictions."

But Rogers wouldn't be so directive as to say, "Use your own convictions about ethical law." Rather, he would say, "I guess I get the feeling that what you are saying is...." This has become a caricature since, of course; it makes you laugh; but it really was Rogers' locution. It worked. He could disappear for people, and leave them in the presence of their consciences.

You see, as a practicing Catholic layman, I thought that was pretty holy; that God was available to every person who had a decent upbringing,

that he could self-consult, as it were, and hear God speaking to him. I was thinking of William James's idea that the conscience can provide access to the Holy Spirit.

How was Rogers as a person?

A terrific human being. We used to make jokes about him, though. For example, when I arrived on Rogers' doorstep in 1963, at the University of Wisconsin, Rogers was off in California. When he finally got back to Wisconsin, and I got a chance to shake his hand, to tell him how pleased I was finally to make his acquaintance personally, I said, "I'm very glad to meet you"; and he looked at me and he said, "I can see that." I mean, in ordinary discourse you exchange greetings: "Well, I'm pleased to meet you, too." But Rogers thought maybe I could use a little bit of therapy.

It works, you know; one tumbles pretty easily into this. We corrupted a whole raft of religious orders on the west coast in the '60s by getting the nuns and priests to talk about their distress.

Tell us about that. This can be the open confession of Catholic psychologist William Coulson.

You don't have the power to absolve me at the end, do you?

Once I got to Wisconsin, I joined Rogers in his study of nondirective psychotherapy with normal people. We had the idea that if it was good for neurotics, it would be good for normals. Well, the normal people of Wisconsin proved how normal they were by opting us out as soon as they knew what it was we wanted. Nobody wanted any part of it. So we went to California.

That would do it.

I knew you were going to say that. That was my first mistake, looking for normal people in California. But we found the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the IHMs. They agreed to let us come into

their schools and work with their normal faculty, and with their normal students, and influence the development of normal Catholic family life. It was a disaster.

Now what year are we talking about, roughly?

'66 and '67. There's a tragic book called "Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence", which documents part of our effect on the IHMs and other orders that engaged in similar experiments in what we called "sensitivity" or "encounter." In a chapter of "Lesbian Nuns", one former Immaculate Heart nun describes the summer of 1966, when we did the pilot study in her order -

"We" being you and Rogers?

Rogers and I and eventually 58 others: we had 60 facilitators. We inundated that system with humanistic psychology. We called it Therapy for Normals, TFN. The IHMs had some 60 schools when we started; at the end, they had one. There were some 560 nuns when we began. Within a year after our first interventions, 300 of them were petitioning Rome to get out of their vows. They did not want to be under anyone's authority, except the authority of their imperial inner selves.

Who's that on page 180 of that book?

This is Sister Mary Benjamin, IHM. Sister Mary Benjamin got involved with us in the summer of '66, and became the victim of a lesbian seduction. An older nun in the group, "freeing herself of who she really was internally," decided that she wanted to make love with Sister Mary Benjamin. Well, Sister Mary Benjamin engaged in this; and then was stricken with guilt, and wondered, to quote from her book, "Was I doing something wrong, was I doing something terrible? I talked to a priest - "

Unfortunately, we had talked to him first. "I talked to a priest," she says, "who refused to pass judgement on my actions. He said it was up to me

to decide if they were right or wrong. He opened a door, and I walked through the door, realizing I was on my own."

This is her liberation?

This is her liberation. Now, her parents had not delivered her to the IHMs in order for her to be on her own. She was precious to them. She describes the day in 1962 when they drove her in the station wagon to Montecito, to the IHMs novitiate. How excited they were, to be delivering someone into God's hands! Well, instead they delivered her into the hands of nondirective psychology.

But to mitigate your own guilt, Dr. Coulson, psychologists don't know what they are doing when it comes to the inner depth of the human person; and one would think that the Catholic Church, with 2000 years' experience, does know what it is doing. This priest is the co-culprit. Had he nipped this in the bud - but he sounds like Rogers: "Well, it seems to me that perhaps you might perhaps do this or that."

"What does this mean to you?" not "What does it mean to me?" Or to God. The priest got confused about his role as a confessor. He thought it was personal, and he consulted himself and said, "I can't pass judgement on you." But that's not what Confession is. It is not about making a decision for the client; rather it's what God says. In fact, God has already judged on this matter. You are quite right to feel guilty about it. "Go thou and sin no more." Instead he said she should decide.

Okay. Now, why did you choose the IHM order in the first place? Or did they choose you?

Well, they hustled us pretty good. They were progressive to begin with. A shoestring relative of one of Rogers' Wisconsin colleagues was a member of the community. By then we were at the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute (WBSI) in La Jolla, which is a suburb of San Diego; as a Catholic, I was assigned to exploit the connection. I spoke to the

California Conference of Major Superiors of Women's Religious Orders, and showed them a film of Carl Rogers doing psychotherapy.

And Rogers' reputation had already grown.

Oh yes. Rogers had a great reputation. He was former president of the American Psychological Association; he won its first Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award. And WBSI was also the occasional home of Abraham Maslow, the other great figure in humanistic psychology.

What do you mean by humanistic psychology?

Well, it's also called third-force psychology. Maslow referred to it as Psychology Three. By that he meant to oppose it to Freud, which is Psychology One, and Skinner and Watson, the behaviorism which is Psychology Two. We Catholics who got involved in it thought this third force would take account of Catholic things. It would take account of the fact that every person is precious, that we are not just corrupted as Freud would have it, or a "tabula rasa", which is available to be conditioned in whatever way the behaviorist chooses; but rather we have human potential, and it's glorious because we are the children of a loving Creator who has something marvelous in mind for every one of us.

That could be very seductive even for Catholics who reject the other two with a simple wave of the hand. Okay, continue now with the story of the IHMs.

As I said, the IHMs were pretty progressive, but some of the leadership was a bit nervous about the secular psychologist from La Jolla coming in; and so I met with nearly the whole community; they were gathered in a gymnasium at Immaculate Heart High School in Hollywood, on an April day in 1967. We've already done the pilot study, we told them. Now we want to get everybody in the system to get involved in nondirective self-exploration. We call it encounter groups but if that name doesn't please you, we'll call it something else. We'll call it the person group.

So they went along with us, and they trusted us, and that is partly my responsibility, because they thought, "These people wouldn't hurt us: the project coordinator is a Catholic." Rogers, however, was the principal investigator. He was the brains behind the project, and he was probably anti-Catholic; at the time I didn't recognize it because I probably was, too. We both had a bias against hierarchy. I was flush with Vatican II, and I thought, "I am the Church; I am as Catholic as the Pope. Didn't Pope John XXIII want us to open the windows and let in some fresh air? Here we come!" And we did, and within a year those nuns wanted out of their vows.

How did you do this - just with lectures?

Yes, there were lectures; and we arranged workshops for their school faculty, those who would volunteer. We didn't want to force anybody to do this, which was a symbol of how good we were.

But at first you had a plenary session for the community.

That was lecture. I told them what we wanted to do, and showed them a film of an encounter group; and it looked pretty holy. The people in that film seemed to be better people at the end of that session than they were when it began. They were more open with one another, they were less deceitful, they didn't hide their judgements from one another; if they didn't like one another they were inclined to say so; and if they were attracted to one another, they were inclined to say that, too.

Rogers and I did a tape for Bell and Howell summarizing that project; and I talked about some of the short-term effects and said that when people do what they deeply want to do, it isn't immoral. Well, we hadn't waited long enough. The lesbian nuns' book, for example, hadn't come out yet; and we hadn't gotten the reports of seductions in psychotherapy, which became virtually routine in California. We had trained people who didn't have Rogers' innate discipline from his own fundamentalist Protestant background, people that thought that being themselves meant unleashing libido.

Maslow did warn us about this, Maslow believed in evil, and we didn't. He said our problem was our total confusion about evil. (This is quoting from Maslow's journals, which came out too late to stop us. His journals came out in '79, and we had done our damage by then.) Maslow said there was danger in our thinking and acting as if there were no paranoids or psychopaths or SOBs in the world to mess things up.

We created a miniature utopian society, the encounter group. As long as Rogers and those who feared Rogers' judgement were present it was okay, because nobody fooled around in the presence of Carl Rogers. He kept people in line; he was a moral force. People did, in fact, consult their consciences, and it looked like good things were happening.

But once you had those 560 nuns broken down into their encounter groups, how long did it take for the damage to set in?

Well, in the summer of '67 the IHMs were having their chapter. They had been called, as all religious orders were, to reevaluate their mode of living, and to bring it more in line with the charisms of their founder. So they were ready for us. They were ready for an intensive look at themselves with the help of humanistic psychologists. We overcame their traditions, we overcame their faith. Bud Keiser, a Paulist priest, producer of "Insight," I think you may know him -

Enough said.

Okay. He wrote a book in 1991 called . He's got a chapter in there about his romantic involvement with one of our nuns, with one of the IHMs. Father Kaiser explains that as "Genevieve," as he calls her, got in the spirit of Rogerian nondirective encounter, prepositioned him sexually. He refused her, because he didn't see how he could have something going with her and still be a good priest; but she got sexually involved with her Rogerian therapist. We were referring the nuns who opened up too much in our encounter groups to therapists who were on the periphery.



At least this was a male therapist.

He got her involved with sex games, in therapy. 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, don't do that." Then his followers would 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 and not carbon copies of you."

Marvelous, indeed. How many years did it take to destroy this Immaculate Heart order?

It took about a year and a half.

Of the 560, how many are left?

There are the retired nuns, who are living in the mother house in Hollywood; there is a small group of radical feminists, who run a center for feminist theology in a storefront in Hollywood -

They're hardly survivors.

No, they're not a canonical group.

But the order as a whole, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which ran all those schools?

There are a few of them in Wichita whom I visited recently, who are going to make a go of it as traditional teaching nuns; and there are a few doing the same in Beverly Hills. There may be a couple dozen left all together, apart from whom, < kaput >, they're gone.

And the college campus -

The college campus was sold. There is no more Immaculate Heart College. It doesn't exist. It's ceased to function because of our good

offices. One mother pulled her daughter out before it closed, saying, "Listen, she can lose her faith for free at the state college."

Our grant had been for three years, but we called off the study after two, because we were alarmed about the results. We thought we could make the IHMs better than they were; and we destroyed them.

Did you do this kind of program anywhere else?

We did similar programs for the Jesuits, for the Franciscans, for the Sisters of Providence of Charity, and for the Mercy Sisters. We did dozens of Catholic religious organizations, because as you recall, in the excitement following Vatican II, everybody wanted to update, everybody wanted to renew; and we offered a way for people to renew, without having to bother to study. We said, we'll help you look within. After all, is not God in your heart? Is it not sufficient to be yourself, and wouldn't that make you a good Catholic? And if it doesn't, then perhaps you shouldn't have been a Catholic in the first place. Well, after a while there weren't many Catholics left.

Now, you mentioned that the religious orders had received a mandate to renew themselves according to the original spirit of their founders, which would have been wonderful.

Yes.

For example, the original spirit of the Jesuits was Saint Ignatius Loyola...

That's right. Speaking of Saint Ignatius, I brought with me a letter that Carl Rogers got, after we did a workshop at a Jesuit university in the summer of '65. One of the young Jesuits, just about to be ordained, wrote as follows about being with Rogers at an encounter group for five days: "It seemed like a beautiful birth to a new existence. It was as if so many of the things that I valued in word, were now becoming true for me in fact. It was extremely difficult to describe the experience. I had

not known how unaware I was of my deepest feelings, nor how valuable they might be to other people. Only when I began to express what was rising somewhere deep within the center of me, and saw the tears in the eyes of the other group members because I was saying something so true for them, too - only then did I begin to really feel that I was deeply a part of the human race. Never in my life before that group experience, had I experienced < me > so intently; and then to have that < me > so confirmed and loved by the group, who by this time were sensitive and reacting to my phoniness, was like receiving a gift that I could never - "

"Reacting to my phoniness"?

"My phoniness." But what < is > his phoniness? Well, his phoniness is among other things his Catholic doctrine. Because when you look within yourself, and you find the Creed, for example, you can imagine someone saying, "Oh, you're just being a mama's boy, aren't you? You're just doing what you were taught to do; I want to hear from the < real > you."

The proof of authenticity on the humanistic psychology model is to go against what you were trained to be, to call all of that phoniness, and to say what is deepest within you. What's deepest within you, however, are certain unrequited longings. We provoked an epidemic of sexual misconduct among clergy and therapists -

And it seemed to be justified by psychology, which is supposed to be a science. Now, the documents of Vatican II are never read, but they include beautiful and profound things. One can also find very naive things, including the statement that theology should profit from the insights of contemporary social science. I don't know which document that was, but it gave you people .

That's right. I'll tell you what Rogers came to see, and he came to see it pretty quickly, because her really loved those women. I'm going to quote him in a tape that he and I made in '76: "I left there feeling, Well, I started this damned thing, and look where it's taking us; I don't even know where it's taking me. I don't have any idea what's going to happen

next. And I woke up the next morning feeling so depressed, that I could hardly stand it. And I realized what was wrong. Yes, I started this thing, and now look where it's carrying us. Where is it going to carry us? And did I start something that is in some fundamental way mistaken, and will lead us off into paths that we will regret?"

That's a credit to him, that he at least had pangs of conscience; whereas these other orders, like the Jesuits, even when they saw that the IHMs were almost extinct, nevertheless they invited the same team in.

Oh, yes. Well, actually we started with the Jesuits before we started with the nuns. We did our first Jesuit workshop in '65. Rogers got two honorary doctorates from Jesuit universities. They thought we were saviors. I don't know whether you remember, but in '67 the Jesuits had a big conference at Santa Clara, and there was a lot of talk about the "Third Way" among the Jesuits.

You were involved with that, too? It had to do with lifestyle.

Yes, lifestyle. We did not consult directly on that conference, but we were cheerleaders.

What is this Third Way?

The first two ways are faithful marriage and celibacy. But now there was this more humane way, a more human way - all too human as I see it today. The idea was that priests could date. One priest, for example, defined his celibacy as, "It means I don't have to marry the girl."

Only a Jesuit could have said that.

As a matter of fact that wasn't a Jesuit. I think the Jesuits are capable of bouncing back because they had such strong traditions of their own, and God willing they will. A good book to read on this whole question is Fr. Joseph Becker's . It reviews the collapse of Jesuit training between 1965 and 1975. Jesuit formation virtually fell apart; and Father Becker knows the influence of the Rogerians pretty well. He cites a number of Jesuit

novice masters who claimed that the authority for what they did - and didn't do - was Carl Rogers.

Later on when the Jesuits gave Rogers those honorary doctorates, I think they wanted to credit him with his influence on the Jesuit way of life.

But do you think there were any short-term beneficial effects? Did it seem as if you were getting somewhere in the good sense?

Well, priests and nuns became more available to the people that they worked with; they were less remote...

But we didn't have a doctrine of evil. As I've said, Maslow saw that we failed to understand the reality of evil in human life. When we implied to people that they could trust their evil impulses, they also understood us to mean that they could trust their evil impulses, that they really weren't evil.

But they really evil. This hit home again for Rogers in the 1970s, when rumors began to circulate about a group that had spun off from ours. By then we had become the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, having spun off from WBSI; and at the same time there spun off another group called the Center for Feeling Therapy in Hollywood.

Well, charges were brought against the guys at the Center for Feeling Therapy - one of three founders of that, by the way, being a Jesuit who had left the order - and among the things that the State of California was perceptive enough to charge them with was killing babies. Eleven times, women who became pregnant while they were in the compound, the Center for Feeling Therapy, were forced to abort their babies. The State of California charged them with this crime -

Was this before ?

No, this happened after , but the State Medical Board held that it was unethical for those men to force the women to have abortions, because these women wanted their babies.

And this is the result of psychological feeling therapy?

Yes. The idea behind it is that you can't really listen to yourself, if you hear the baby cry. If the baby needs to be fed, or you find yourself being distracted with what the baby is doing, you're not going to be able to deal with yourself.

Humanistic psychotherapy, the kind that has virtually taken over the Church in America, and dominates so many aberrant education like sex education, and drug education, holds that the most important source of authority is within you, that you must listen to yourself. Well, if you have a baby you're carrying under your heart, get rid of it. Women who came into the Center for Feeling Therapy with children were forced to put them up for adoption. The only person who was allowed to have a baby, in an eerie preview of David Koresh, was the principal founder of the institution. All the other babies were killed, or sent away, in the name of getting in touch with the imperial self....

What's your experience with sex education?

We pulled our kids out of the Catholic schools when they began to be corrupted.

Even while you were still a Rogerian psychologist?

Yes, my wife Jeannie had common sense all the while. It wasn't so much that it was there yet, as that we saw it was coming. The kids would get an experiential education if they stayed in that setting; they would not get a Catholic education.

Who carries the day, in experiential education? If you park a group of kids in a circle to talk about their sexual experiences, who's going to have the most interesting stories to tell? The most experienced child.

Where is the direction of influence going to run? It's going to run - and the research confirms this again and again - it's going to run from the

experienced to the inexperienced. The net outcome of sex education, styled as Rogerian encountering, is more sexual experience.

I think that many reading this are beginning to understand the ravages done to children by the so-called professionals.

Yes. You know, one sign of what happened when humanistic psychology moved into the Catholic religious orders was that priests and nuns became bachelors and bachelorettes. They started thinking about conquest, I'm afraid. One would be well advised to stay away from a conference of the National Catholic Education Association, where you get the impression that people are on the make. They see themselves now as "whole persons," and they justify their sexualized behavior on the basis of that theory. It was better when we were more repressed - so says the psychologist.

You don't get invited to these things anymore, I'll wager.

No, but I used to get invited to the National Federation of Priests' Councils. In 1970 I spoke to the National Catholic Guidance Conference.

And you told them they had to be "authentic."

Yes, and I'm ashamed of that.

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