

## **Ruth Sanford 1906 - 2001**

### ***Ed Bodfish***

New York, NY

The "Mother of the Person-Centered Approach" is dead.

She practiced the Person-Centered Approach all her life from her first job as an English teacher, as a counselor, as a wife and mother, as an administrator, in her Experimental Program in education, in her community work and writing, as a therapist and in the last 29 years within the Person-Centered movement.

Ruth Sanford passed away suddenly of heart failure about 11:10 PM Wednesday, November 28. She was 29 days short of her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday. She wished to live only so long as she was fully alive.

Ruth Sanford was born in Warren, PA, December 26, 1906. She spent some of her childhood years on a farm and others in the town of Jamestown, NY. Her father, Eldon, gave her the unconditional love that allowed her to develop in many directions. Her mother, Elma, a strict and loving teacher, was close lifelong. Her grandparents were also loving teachers.

Raised as a strict Methodist she questioned original sin at 12, the confirmation age.

After working for two years she went to Lebanon Valley College, a small religious college in Annville, PA.

Graduating in the Depression in 1930 she found a job teaching English (her major) in Lakeville, NY. She developed novel ways of teaching poetry and after receiving many questions from her students decided she should learn something about counseling.

She went to Columbia Teachers College, lived at International House, and received a Master's in Counseling. While working in the Dean's office counseling students, she met Niel Sanford, a Yale Graduate who had taught in Changsha, China in 1924-26. They were married and in 1940 set off to Tampa University where Niel had been appointed Dean. So began a career as Dean's or faculty wife at University of Tampa, and Western Maryland College, but also as counselor/faculty herself.

Their daughter and only child, Mei Mei, was born in 1947.

A crisis in middle life when she was suffering from overload trying to take care of everyone was resolved in a person-centered way when a dear therapist friend visited for a week and pointed out that her four year old daughter had strengths of her own as did Ruth's husband, mother and mother in law.

They moved to New Jersey and then to Seaford, New York where Niel became a distinguished rehabilitation counselor, winner of Regional awards and a nominee for a National one. Ruth became a counselor at West Hempstead High School on Long Island.

Ruth and Niel were both counselors, progressives, concerned with education and civil rights, and devoted to their daughter Mei Mei. They supported each other in whatever they undertook. In their later years they set aside an hour every day in which they dropped whatever they were doing for an hour to be together. They also set aside a week or two for travel every year and ventured all over the world. Neil joined the Peace Corps in Thailand in 1981. He also returned to China after 56 years. Niel died of cancer of the tongue in 1989. They were married just short of 50 years.

It was not many years before Ruth became head of Counseling. She worked on the Holding Power Project for New York State that studied the reasons why students stayed on or dropped out. She developed EXP, the Experimental Program, during a sabbatical and practiced it with wide cooperation from principal, teachers, and counselors for six years. Students were given a "Living Textbook" with materials from contemporary authors but it was theirs to add to or subtract from as they saw fit. The program is written up in Carl Rogers and Jerome Freiberg's *Freedom to Learn* (1994). Ruth joined Niel in receiving an award for her counseling.

When she retired from West Hempstead she became active in community work, becoming Project Coordinator on the Merrick Road Project. She was a major reason for the beautiful Calgary pear trees along Merrick Road, a practice that had been adopted in many parts of Long Island. She wrote a weekly column "As I See It," for the Seaford-Wantagh Observer for five years. One of those articles "Loving with an Open Hand" has traveled all over the world. People put it up on their refrigerator. It was about a butterfly someone tried to help out of its cocoon; tragically, because the butterfly was never allowed to develop its wings under its own power. The article was said to contain the essence of the Person-Centered Approach. She received awards for community work and journalism.

She wrote a thorough and statistical study of "Creativity and Intelligence." This is the paper Carl liked so much, saying it was worth four or five PhD's.

It was during a conference at which she presented her research on creativity (a lifelong interest along with education, community, environment, and politics) that she heard Carl Rogers speak and concluded that she had found her professional home. She took the La Jolla Program at Carl's Center for Studies of the Person. She attended the Mills College 17 day workshop on Community in Oakland and made a difference, specifically asking the workshop to go back and attend to Vincente, a Mexican concerned for his people who had been passed over. She was lucky enough to have Carl as facilitator for her small group. During a last minute dash for a plane to La Jolla to visit a colleague after that workshop she found the only seat remaining was a seat next to Carl's. He wrote to her and asked if he could describe her part in the workshop. She went to the concluding days of a workshop at Sagamore, NY on 7/7/77 and persuaded Carl to begin Person-Centered workshops on the East Coast with local staff. Thus the workshops at Post College of Long Island University, the cooperation with the Center for Interpersonal Growth and their Ongoing Learning Experience program, and many other East Coast workshops began.

During the last ten years of Carl Roger's life Ruth and Carl did as many as 80 –100 workshops all over the world in the United States, Mexico, Europe, South Africa and the then Soviet Union. The work they did in Dublin, South Africa, and the Soviet Union along with the work Carl and others did in Rust, Austria was a major reason for Carl's being nominated for a Nobel Peace prize.

Given a magnificent introduction to South Africa in 1982 by Len Holdstock, and working well together and loving it, they invited participation from everyone, enabled personal changes, and began a chain of Person-Centered workshops across the country. The workshops they did in South Africa gave people in all the apartheid classifications -- White, Black, Colored, and Asian, a chance to communicate across lines of difference as they never had before. They made clear they wanted to hear from everyone. Shirley Shochot organized the networking and planning for Carl and Ruth's return in 1986. A workshop then, despite seemingly irreconcilably sharp differences amongst the facilitators, paired the facilitators for 18 small groups and they discovered they *could* work together. A woman from Soweto said "Thank you for bringing us bitter medicine which we needed to take." Ruth went back in '87 after Carl's death while suffering a bout of shingles. She returned in 1995 and did 10 workshops in 8 days. In 1998 there was the culmination of the International PCA Forum in South Africa honoring their work and looking forward under the new "person-directed" government of Nelson Mandela. A book, *The Person-Centered Approach in South Africa*, containing their journals of 1982 and 1986 as well as 14 contemporary essays of South African colleagues is expected soon.

In those journals Carl spoke of how they complemented each other. He said that people valued him for the workshops and the later write-up but they loved Ruth. She was the one they felt they could approach.

Let me also quote from a letter of a perceptive friend who loved Ruth. He is speaking of Carl and Ruth: "Carl was the more famous one (not at last because of his books, I believe), but you (Ruth) were equal and joined in the attempt to put into words and put into action what you sensed was a transforming power. Now I believe that Carl may have learned a lot from you as you learned a lot from Carl and it was the transformation of the person of Carl himself that shifted into the last shape of the PCA with deep caring, allowing tears to run and hearts to be touched by the struggling of another person. I always saw you both as complementary persons who together could develop a great vision and whose impression and perception of the persons around you was a great source of affection."

It was a great collaboration. Two persons, Carl, 75-85 and Ruth in her 70's found each other and found new energies, new capacities, and new ways of working. They worked hard and played hard. Carl gave Ruth new opportunities and a wider platform and Ruth taught him to play, gave him new ways of dialoguing and ways of reaching persons he would not otherwise have reached. The way they enabled each other enabled them to help others. This may have cycled back and forth between them and other persons a number of times. I can only guess what they might have started or accomplished given another five years.

They introduced humanistic psychology and the Person-Centered Approach into the Soviet Union in Moscow and in Tbilisi, Georgia. After a fractious beginning full of personal recriminations at the workshop in Moscow Carl and Ruth would repeatedly hold up their

hands and say, "Please don't all talk at once, we want to hear you, we want to hear each one of you." At the end of the session they asked for five minutes of silence and that participants not speak with each other on the way out. The next day the group settled down to work. At a report to the Scientific Council all 30 participants appeared to give witness. One had thought the approach was for Westerners but discovered "We can do it ourselves." Another said it was like the Chekhov story where everyone is waiting for the piano player when suddenly the piano begins playing itself. There is the story of Carl's saying to their host Alexey Matushkin, "You know, it's dangerous to empower people in a country used to top down leadership." Alexey thought for a moment and replied, "More dangerous not to." In Tbilisi Ruth introduced small groups on men-women relations. She noticed that all the questions of an intellectual nature were addressed to Carl. She felt passed over. She told the group she didn't know if it was Carl's fame as a psychologist or a local tradition favoring men for discussions of theory but that she had worked too long to appreciate her brain and was not going to give that up. She said she just needed to say that. This opened up a whole discussion of gender issues. They became a feature of the subsequent workshops in Moscow and Tbilisi when she returned with Fran Macy in 1988.

The example of a man and a woman working together as equals was important in both South Africa and in the Soviet Union. After Carl's death she revised the review article, "Client-Centered Therapy," she and Carl wrote for the sixth edition of the *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* edited by H. Kaplan and B. Sadock (1994). Like Carl she kept up with the sciences and broke new ground when with Ed Bodfish she embarked on a wide ranging synthesis of the theory of chaos and the theory of the person-centered approach. They worked together on almost all of her many projects during the last ten to fourteen years of her life. She and Bob Barth conducted an intensive six to eight year study in qualitative research on the inner process of significant change in the individual" (Barth & Sanford, 1994). She wrote her autobiography in 1992 in her graceful, appealing style for Mel Suhd's (1997) *Positive Regard*, an autobiographical study of Carl Rogers and eight notables influenced by him. Also in 1992 she gave a memorable talk in a church on the island of Terschelling about what it was like to work with Carl Rogers. It had depth, humor, and wide participation. Her voice became clearer and stronger as she grew older.

Ruth acquired many stories and anecdotes over her long life. For example, in Guadalajara before a very large audience she was listening to a lengthy translation into Spanish of a reply of Carl's to a question. She thought it must take longer to say things in Spanish. The translator asked "How was that?" Carl replied, "Oh fine, and I liked your speech, too!"

She was sympathetic to people caught in institutional grids. While studying for a job in the NY area her teacher gave her an example of the "Finagle Factor," "I can't specifically recommend anyone but I can get your papers moved to the top of the pile." When she had to deal with a volatile principal who would not stick to what he said, she wrote memos to him to pin him down: "This is how I understand our conversation. If you understand differently, please let me know." He replied, "Ruth, you do write memos to a fault."

She was sympathetic to the underdog, to those not paid attention to, not considered special, not given as many chances to realize their great potential, or simply not included. Along with this went a great love of children. Aware of all children are up against, as well as of their creativity, she was thoroughly on their side and had a rich store of stories about

children. One was about a boy whose mother said, "Now Billy, you must promise me you'll never do that again!" Billy paused and thought a minute, then said, "Sometime, then I will." The phrase "Sometime, then I will," became a family favorite used on many occasions.

She looked to new possibilities, new paradigms in the human sciences and the physical sciences. The last, best reference in the paper on "Intimacy in the Person-Centered Approach. Do We Dare?" is Barry Witz and Ruth Sanford – Themselves.

She was an inspiration to many people in many ways: her many careers, her blooming after retirement, the joy and naturalness she brought to the work she loved, and the way she continued the work after Carl died. During the last ten years of her life despite a reduction of eyesight to 2% she accomplished much. She taught herself to work with tapes. She would dictate, her devoted secretary Cheryl Desrosiers would transcribe and she and Ed Bodfish would edit the transcript. This is how she continued her writing. During the last three years back problems limited her going to conferences but she kept up the three hour trip to her Experiencing Diversity workshop.

She taught interns and students at Hofstra, Post, and Union colleges. She and her students were partners in learning. This included the student in the grade evaluation and in the case of the interns, their supervisors as well.

She was co-director of the Center for Interpersonal Growth on Long Island and gave many workshops including the series known as the Ongoing Learning Experience. She gave Open Forums at the Association for the Person-Centered Approach conferences in Tampa and Kutztown as well as the International PCA Forum in Greece. The idea was to give everyone a chance to discuss their current work.

She loved people. A student spoke of all the good connections she made and how they continued to grow or soar. She had a voluminous correspondence over many years all over the world. There was always time to answer the email. She has a web page <http://ruthsanford.tripod.com/Toc.htm>. There one can sample some of her papers, poems, columns, and photos. Streaming audiotapes and videos are available. There is also a link to the Experiencing Diversity page.

This thread of openness, inclusiveness, of "moving beyond elitism" led to the Experiencing Diversity workshops. Now in their ninth year they are a living part of her legacy. She began the planning in 1993 with a dedicated group of volunteers. The workshops have had an age span from 17 to 94, hip hop singers, African-American drummers, and concert pianists, Buddhists and Judaeo-Christians, persons of different sexual orientations, many ethnicities, local youngsters and international visitors, new faces and a nucleus of people who continue to return. She has presented with staff on the workshop at the Eastern Psychological Association a number of times as well as at other conferences, published a paper about the workshop in *Experiencing Relatedness*, edited by Colin Lago and Mhairi McMillan, PCCS Books (1999) The Experiencing Diversity workshops have generated other Diversity workshops notably in Chicago. Workshop members have donated a collage as well as extensive photo albums in both 1998, 2000, and 2001 which are to be added to Experiencing Diversity's website. "It has truly "taken on a life of its own."

She was an exceptional professional who could set aside those professional capacities for a personal connection. She shared many qualities with Carl -- strict religious early background, church work in their youth, work in institutions, love of people, a sense of the huge potential in persons. Both their commonalities, especially their common devotion to the approach and their complementarities helped their work. This is not to say that the road was easy or the work light. Her clear, warm voice inspired trust in many persons in many groups. Her strength could turn a meeting around. Her love of the approach gave her exceptional stamina. At 94 she paraphrased Justice Wendell Holmes, "Oh, to be ninety again!"

She was unique. "I shall not see her like again."

I had a conversation with Lewis Gover about her:

Lewis – What do you remember about her with the strongest feeling?

Ed – The deep love she had.

Lewis – I feel that too but more, I think she was the truest person I knew.

Ed – I think she was the best person since my parents I knew.

Lewis – Her being the truest person enabled her to be the best person you knew.

Ed – You mean she knew herself best?

Lewis – Yes!

She leaves a daughter, Mei Mei, musician, wood carver, anthropologist, Fulbright and Ford Foundation Fellow, and Professor of Religion at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington.

She supported many causes especially the environment, civil rights, Native Americans, and was a dedicated Democrat. She was a generous person and helped a number of persons with their education.

She composed her epitaph, "She laughed, she loved, she listened, and she did what she could."

## REFERENCES

- Barth, R., & Sanford, R. (1994). Human science and the person-centered approach: An inquiry into the inner process of significant change within individuals. *The Person-Centered Journal*, 1(2), 19-36. [corrections: issue 3, 93-95].
- Kaplan, H.I. & Sadock, B. 1995. *Comprehensive textbook of psychiatry*, sixth edition. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins
- Rogers, C. R. & Freiberg, H.J. (1994). *Freedom to learn*, 3rd edition. NY: MacMillan Coll Div.
- Suhd, M. (1997). *Positive regard*. Palo Alto: Science & Behavior Books.

## **Policy Statement**

The Person-Centered Journal is sponsored by the Association for Development of the Person-Centered Approach (ADPCA). The publication is intended to promote and disseminate scholarly thinking about person-centered principles, practices, and philosophy.

All materials contained in The Person-Centered Journal are the property of the ADPCA, which grants reproduction permission to libraries, researchers, and teachers to copy all or part of the materials in this issue for scholarly purposes with the stipulation that no fee for profit be charged to the consumer for the use or possession of such copies.