
Remembering Rollo May: An Interview with Irvin Yalom

Ilene Serlin

Saybrook Institute

lin: Dr. Yalom, it's been two weeks since Rollo May died. I know you were close to him and I wonder if you could speak about how you and he met and how your relationship evolved.

om: I first met Rollo May in spirit, through his writing, when I was a resident in Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins in 1957. At that point I was confused about the professional direction I wanted to take in Psychiatry. Hopkins (and the field at large at that time) offered two options: 1) an orthodox psychoanalytic approach (which at Hopkins was housed in the consultation service and headed by Eugene Meyer) and an empirically based view of personality and motivation, housed in the department proper in the Phipps Clinic headed by John Whitehorn and Jerome Frank. Neither option seemed satisfactory; each, I thought, left out the very essence of the human being. It was at that time that I first discovered Rollo May's book, *Existence*, which was exceedingly liberating — a breath of very fresh air. He revealed to me another whole unexplored wing of the edifice of psychotherapy. I read the book thoroughly, and I think that it changed me in a very significant way. I had had an exceedingly rigorous pre-medical, scientific education. The few elective courses available I devoted entirely to literature and, as a result, had no philosophical background whatsoever. After my exposure to Rollo's thinking I enrolled in undergraduate courses

at Hopkins in philosophy and began my education, my philosophical education, at that point. Naturally, I read his other books, the older ones and the new books as they were published and was especially enriched by the *Meaning of Anxiety* and *Love and Will* — both landmark works. My first face-to-face meeting with Rollo May occurred in 1976 after he had moved to California from New York. At that point I had been searching for a therapist with an existential orientation. I had had other therapeutic experiences, including 700 hours of psychoanalysis with an orthodox Freudian training analyst in Baltimore and, later, a year of analysis in the middle school (Dr. Charles Rycroft) in London. In an effort to discover methods of deepening an existential approach to therapy I, in the early 1970's, started doing therapy — both individual and group therapy — with patients with terminal cancer. Though I learned a great deal from this work which was to last for a decade (and which was the impetus for my book, *Existential Psychotherapy*), it also generated considerable anxiety, and it seemed to me that it would be an excellent time to pursue further therapy. So, for the next three years, I made the eighty minute commute from Palo Alto to Tiburon, and Rollo and I met once a week for approximately ten months a year. He was always gone for the summer to his home in New Hampshire. At that time both of us were traveling a great deal for conferences and lectures, and I suspect we must have met about twenty-five to thirty times a year. It's funny but at some point I thought I had seen a picture of Rollo as a short, dumpy, balding man with a mustache. In retrospect, it may have been a photograph of Alfred Adler. So I was quite astonished to meet Rollo in the flesh, not short, not balding but tall, stately and graceful (and with a flowing gray head of hair).

Serlin: What kind of a therapist was he for you?

Yalom: He was a very good therapist for me. He treated me in an open, collegial way and was quick to point out that although we were meeting as client and therapist, that we also had a special collegial relationship. He was quite forthcoming with information about himself — I would consider him a relatively highly self-revealing therapist — though I never particularly tested the limits on that. Another aspect of my therapy with him was that I thought it might be useful for me to use the commute time, by listening to the tape of my previous session. That was actually a practice I had often in my own practice with commuting patients — it's an excellent use of the traveling time

and primes the patient for the next hour. So I suggested that we tape record the sessions, and he was quite agreeable to that as he was to any type of innovation I suggested. So therefore, we taped each session, and I listened to it on my way to the session the following week.

Serlin: In his therapeutic work with you, Dr. Yalom, what about it was existential? In which ways did his practice correspond to his writings?

Yalom: Much of the material that I brought up, certainly in the early part of our work together, had an existential flavor since I was talking about my feelings about working with dying patients and the death anxiety that had erupted within me. Many of the dreams I was having at that time represented one or another manifestations of death anxiety. So it's clear in that way we were working from an existential perspective. He also emphasized responsibility for choice a good deal in my work with him. But I think, like all existential therapists, the work that can explicitly be called 'Existential' is difficult to delineate. I have always felt that the term 'Existential therapy' reflects not a discrete, comprehensive body of techniques, but, instead, a posture, a sensibility in the therapist. Let me say something about the correspondence between his writing and his life. It was inspirational to see how Rollo dealt with his own decline and aging and failing memory. He always tried to face it squarely. There were times when he was overcome with confusion and anxiety and could not get outside of it. But generally when I would speak to him the following day, he would go back to the episode and talk about how awful it was to have lost his bearing the day before. He was magnificent in his ability to continue confronting and exploring his anxiety throughout his illness. His idea that the primary way that we have of combating the despair in aging and disintegration is through the act of creation, through our courage to continue developing and expressing our creative potential, was something that was not a mere verbal formulation by Rollo — it was something that he enacted quite wonderfully, setting a model for us all.

Serlin: Recently I read *The Courage to Create* again and I was struck by the way he emphasized that creation wasn't just about creating a poem or a painting or a thought, but it's about the creation of a life — a life well lived.

Yalom: Exactly, he felt that our major antidote to despair is creation and that few things are more important than continuing to muster the courage to create. In that way he was far closer to Nietzsche than to Kierkegaard.

Serlin: Can you speak of the nature of the relationship between the two of you?

Yalom: We had a genuine encounter. I had a great deal of affection and respect for him and I had a strong sense of his liking and respecting me. It was only about a year after we stopped therapy that he began inviting me and my wife, Marilyn (of whom he became very fond) to attend gatherings at his home. After that I began to see a great deal of Rollo either in conversations at his home, long walks, or shared activities — for example I accompanied him from time to time to Sunday meditations at the Green Gulch Zen Center in Mill Valley. In later years I began to see even more of him. As he began to fail our roles reversed and he called upon me for help. A very vivid memory occurred when we were in the Caprice restaurant in Tiburon — we often lunched there together — and Rollo suddenly had an excruciating pain in his neck that lasted for several minutes. These terrible attacks began to recur with great frequency over the next couple of days — it was later diagnosed as an acute neuritis of his glossopharyngeal nerve and ultimately resulted in hospitalization. Nothing was able to alleviate the pain and eventually neurosurgery was required to sever the nerve. During his post-operative course he suffered a major cerebral infarct and went into a prolonged period of confusion and disorientation. Following that, he was never entirely the same, and though he lived for another three years, he had multiple small cerebral infarcts each of which left its traces: confusion, disorganization, recent memory loss. However, there were always times of clearing. Whenever I visited him during those days, he could always engage in lucid and productive discussions of the past, even though his recent memory loss might be so impaired that he might have forgotten what we had talked about only fifteen minutes before. In fact, it was during those periods that I learned most about his earlier years and about his development in the field, including his work with the aforementioned bald, mustached Alfred Adler when he was a very young man.

Serlin: How did you come to see him as a person? What was he like?

alom: Once our therapy relationship had ended and we had transformed it into more of a social relationship, Rollo was quite open in talking about some of the problems that were bedeviling him. Many of them centered around the dissolution of his second marriage which had ended a couple of years before that, and some of his dilemmas about a future impending marriage. His marriage to his third wife, Georgia, I think, turned out to have been an exceedingly fortunate development for him since she was an extraordinarily caring and giving wife during his final years. Rollo was a man who always elevated his companions. In all the many years I knew him I never once remember a petty or trivial conversation. That is really quite a remarkable fact — somehow we always talked about deeper significant issues. Furthermore I don't think that was only true for me — I think it was the way he affected most people. He was also a caring person and manifested a continued persistent interest in others. He always expressed great interest and curiosity about what I was doing and what was happening in my life. He seemed comfortable in his own skin and though he took pleasure in the honors bestowed upon him, he rarely dwelled upon his own achievements. Of all the compliments he ever received he seemed to take most pleasure in the response of an Indian sage — I forget his name — who, after looking deep into his eyes, pronounced to Rollo, "I think you have a great soul." Rollo beamed when he talked about that, and indeed, in the way he cultivated and elevated me and all others in his sphere, it seemed to me to be a very accurate statement.

erlin: You began, Dr. Yalom, by talking about the state of the field of psychology, psychotherapy and what was facing you at the time you started your training. Could you say something about Rollo May's vision of the field and how you picked up on it.

alom: I felt that he made an exceedingly important contribution. The essays (the introduction and the two opening essays) that he wrote in the book *Existence* were quite stunning achievements, and I think influenced a whole generation of therapists. In preparation for his memorial service my wife and I were asked by his widow to prepare some excerpts from his books for the program, and we spent an evening skimming a number of Rollo's books. It was a wonderful exercise because it brought to mind again, for me, of how much ahead of his time Rollo was. Some of the statements we selected (for example: "Every personality problem is a moral problem... it refers

to the question basic to all — 'How shall I live?'" [1939]) seem almost banal now, but it's extremely important to remember their context. These were things that he wrote about many decades ago, long before most therapists appreciated the relevance for therapy of such concepts as courage, creativity, authenticity, and will. The mere fact that one of his books, *Love and Will*, was a *New York Times* Best-seller for over six months I think is exceedingly important. It brought home to the general public an understandable and humanistic view of a psychological therapy. Rollo's book on the meaning of anxiety was particularly important for me, as it was for many therapists. It formulated an understanding of anxiety that was based not on traditional vagaries of psycho-sexual development, but on deeper concerns rooted in existence. Rollo was much influenced by Kierkegaard and soon, at his encouragement, I plunged into reading Kierkegaard. Ultimately I found Nietzsche a richer inspirational source for existential therapy and Rollo and I had many interesting debates about that. I'm certain that Rollo was much drawn to Kierkegaard because of his own religious education and leanings. It's quite interesting to look at some of his earlier works, for example, *The Art of Counseling*, and to see how Rollo started his career with a Christian counseling approach

Serlin: Finally, as this is written for Division 32, and as it came up at the last board meeting when we were all faced with pondering the future of psychology, psychotherapy, of the field today, Rollo's contribution and death seems to mark a kind of a watershed. The question is how do you, what hopes or feelings do you have about the field as it stands and as it looks now and where is the place of Rollo and humanistic psychotherapy headed for?

Yalom: I think Rollo probably is needed more now than ever with the invasion of managed care into psychotherapy. It's going to be very important for all of us to keep his spirit alive in our work. I think that has occurred for a whole generation of therapists. That's why the evening of going back to pick excerpts for the memorial service was so important to me. I saw how many underlined comments of Rollo's I had unconsciously ingested and assimilated and come to consider my own. I think we have all gathered and internalized many of Rollo's thoughts and will in turn pass these along to the next generation. He would have desired no better memorial.

Irvin Yalom is Professor of Psychiatry at the Stanford University School of Medicine. He received his M.D. from Boston University and took his psychiatric training from Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of such classics as *Existential Psychotherapy* and *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, as well as *Inpatient Group Psychotherapy*, *Every Day Gets a Little Closer*, *Love's Executioner* and *Other Tales of Psychotherapy* and *When Nietzsche Wept*. Ilene Serlin received her Ph.D. from the University of Dallas. After having previously taught at the New York Gestalt Institute, she is currently on the faculty of Saybrook Institute Graduate School and Research Center. Dr. Serlin is also in private practice as the director of Imago: Center for Psychotherapy and the Counseling Arts in San Francisco. Address correspondence to: Ilene Serlin, Saybrook Institute, 450 Pacific Ave., San Francisco, CA 94109.