

# Rollo May

Ilene A. Serlin

Rollo Meese May died on October 22, 1994. With his death came the loss of one of the great psychotherapists, teachers, and theoreticians of the twentieth century.

Rollo May is probably remembered best by many people as the founder of existential psychotherapy in the United States. I first read his *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* in Ann Arbor in the late 1960s. Reading the existentialists Camus and Sartre and being active in the student demonstrations all mixed into a heady brew. My friends and I felt like we were creating a new society, based in part on the existentialists' mandate to act. Claiming that the prevailing Freudian and behavioral psychologies were all based on an essentially passive model of the human being, in which childhood events or conditioning shaped behavior, the existential psychologists instead posited an active model. Although acknowledging that much of human life is indeed determined, the existentialists stressed the possibility of freedom and responsibility. Each individual, in the face of determinism, despair, meaninglessness, or death, has the responsibility to create a meaningful life.

This new perspective on human nature demanded a new therapy. An existential psychotherapist, rather than interpreting psychological content symbolically and maintaining a blank facade with the patient, would focus on challenging the patient to make responsible decisions and to live as fully and deeply as possible.

Rollo May was also a leader of humanistic psychology, an outgrowth of existential psychology. Sex, aggression, power drives, and religion were the traditional areas of psychology; humanistic psychology added studies of creativity, love, and altered states of consciousness. As a reaction to the existential despair of post-World War II culture, humanistic psychology in the United States tended to stress peak experiences, joy, and the lighter sides of human existence. Furthermore, in its experiential focus it sometimes blended with Fritz Perls's Gestalt therapy, body therapies, and the counterculture of the 1960s, leading critics to fault humanistic psychology as anti-intellectual and overly subjective.

Rollo May's own work, however, maintained the balance between darkness and light, between the experiential and the intellectual. In his books, he considered fundamental questions of human existence such as the nature of evil, love and will, the meaning of anxiety, and the importance of

myth. In fact, Rollo's inspiration to me and many others came from his ability to name the void but to create in its face, to name evil but to work toward the good, to see meaninglessness but to discover meaning, and to face death but to create life. He was active in the antiwar movement and many other social causes, taught and mentored countless students, and called himself a "gentle rebel" in the face of an increasingly dehumanized world. As today's political climate darkens and as the mental-health system becomes increasingly rooted in biology and technology, Rollo's vision of a humane psychology assumes ever greater importance.

For me, Rollo was not only a visionary and mentor, but a fellow artist. His psychology was based on the humanities, rooted in the great Greek stories and myths. He fought against a scientific psychology based on a nineteenth-century model of physics and insisted on the *art* of psychology. In *The Courage to Create*, he says: "We express our being by creating." He challenged us to "seize the courage necessary to preserve our sensitivity, awareness, and responsibility in the face of radical change," and to "consciously participate, on however small a scale, in the forming of the new society..." The courage to create is connected to the struggle to liberate ourselves, for "That is what we must always base our commitment in the center of our own being, or else no commitment will be ultimately authentic." Since the word courage derives from the French word *coeur*, or heart, the act of committing oneself to being and becoming, to living an authentic life, is a heartfelt act.

Finally, it is the images and the artists which can guide us in this journey. Rollo notes: "This brings us to the most important kind of courage of all. Whereas moral courage is the righting of wrongs, creative courage, in contrast, is the discovering of new forms, new symbols, new patterns on which a new society can be built... But those who present directly and immediately the new forms and symbols are the artists—the dramatists, the musicians, the painters, the dancers, the poets, and those poets of the religious sphere we call saints." In the face of today's mood of deconstruction, it is time to begin Rollo May's process of reconstruction, rebuilding connections, patterns, and new forms.

In his dignity and elegance, in his entire life, Rollo always reminded me that the ultimate creativity is a life well lived and spurred me to help my patients create their own well-lived lives. He reminded me as well to reconnect psychology to its roots in the arts and humanities, and to hold out a human vision that includes inspiration and creativity as well as anxiety and fear. Rollo May touched many of us very deeply, and the best tribute we can pay him is to carry on his work. □

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