
A Tribute to Rollo May and the Arts

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This article will focus on Rollo May's contribution to psychology through his celebration of the arts as an expression of the human psyche. His vision of psychology was one grounded in the humanities, the great classics, and Greek mythology, and his vision of psychotherapy training emphasized a broad cultural education. Rollo May was opposed to quick fixes and technical training, and his vision of psychotherapy is sorely needed in today's psychological landscape.

Keywords: *courage; creativity; art; psychotherapy; psyche*

My tribute and memories of Rollo May's contribution to the field of psychology will center on his celebration of the arts as a fundamental expression of human nature. I came to teach at Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in large part because of Rollo's inspiration, spent happy hours talking about the importance of the arts with him, and developed a course called "Psychotherapy and the Arts."

As a psychologist and dance/movement therapist, for 30 years I have seen the power of the arts to reach difficult places in the human psyche, from the back wards of Bronx State Hospital to private practice settings. (Serlin 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Serlin & Speiser, 2007). In *The Courage to Create*, May (1975) says, "We express our being by creating." His vision of a psychology was grounded in the humanities, and which placed problems of the human condition in the larger context of the great Greek tragedies and all the arts (May, 1991). Although deeply rooted in the European existentialist tradition, which described problems of angst, meaninglessness, and fragmentation, Rollo May also stressed the human capacity to create beauty, meaning, coherence, and just action in our lives. He celebrated the role of artists in society, noting in *The Courage to Create*:

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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. (p. 15)

In the face of an increasingly mechanized world and discipline, he challenged us to “seize the courage necessary to preserve our sensitivity, awareness, and responsibility in the face of radical change,” (p. 2) and to “consciously participate, on however small the scale, in the forming of the new society” (p. 2). The courage to create is connected to the struggle to liberate ourselves, for, “That is why we must always base our commitment in the center of our own being, or else no commitment will be ultimately authentic” (p. 3). That which distinguishes humans from other beings is that “courage is necessary to make being and becoming possible” (p. 4). Because 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.

In a chapter that I wrote for Rollo May and Kirk Schneider's (1994) book, *The Psychology of Existence*, I examined the case of a woman artist who was struggling to find her authentic voice. Called “Notes on the Single Woman: The Anne Sexton Complex” (Serlin, 1994), it explored the question of why so many creative women poets and artists commit suicide. This client was a dancer, had identified with the poet Anne Sexton, and connected her own creativity with darkness and death. Although existential therapy is often understood in the model of the individual solitary hero who grapples with anxiety, despair, meaning, freedom, creativity, and death, literature from feminist theory reminds us about the importance of connection, of care; where do these elements find a place in existential theory (Gilligan, 1982)? Women artists from Sylvia Plath to Anne Sexton have identified creativity with the downward pull toward death. Death appears in images of a sexual, mystical, or ecstatic union with a ghostly lover or mother. Is it possible, though, to use creativity in service of life? Of relationships? This case study explored the history of a woman dancer who made two suicide attempts but decided to live. It explores what elements helped her choose life and put her creativity in service of life instead of death.

This story is particular to Maria but is not unfamiliar to many single women who are creative, lonely, and struggling to put their creativity into

their everyday lives. Without the structure of a family or extended family, it becomes necessary to "compose a life," which combines elements of work and care. Like many women of the 1950s, Maria struggled to escape the 1950s bored housewife role of her own mother. However, her freedom was a false freedom, because she stayed in her apartment alone all weekend. Finding the balance between love and work and genuine expressions of relatedness, authenticity, meaning, and freedom is the existential challenge of many creative single women today.

After Maria's descent into darkness, she was able to reconstruct her life. She chose to live, to find a balance between freedom and connection, dependence and independence, and to use her creativity in service of life instead of death. Existential therapy helped her make the decision and find a new narrative for a life of meaning and connection. After two suicide attempts, she began to put her creativity in service of everyday life. In the words of Mary Catherine Bateson (1989), she "composed a life" that showed courage, authenticity, and relatedness.

Rollo reminds us that the ultimate creativity is a life well lived, and for us to help our clients find their own voices and well-lived lives. As we do so, therapists and clients together can see the beauty and the personal and universal patterns of all human experience; art can clarify, deepen, and ennoble our lives.

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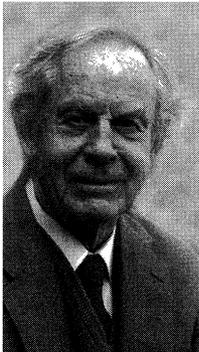
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Rollo May

1909-1994

Tom Greening

Read at Memorial Service at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco



No need for us to feel downhearted
because our Rollo has departed.
The searching artist now can rest
in the fulfillment of his quest.
As he ascends, we can rejoice
that he is soothed by Beauty's voice.
Transcending our poor earthly grief,
let us imagine God's relief
to have in heaven such a man
to help Him thwart the Devil's plan.
Dear Rollo now is God's resource
for channeling daimonic force
to aid us sinners left behind,
as Huxley urged, to be more kind.