

Rollo May on Existential Psychotherapy

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This article is a lightly edited transcription of an interview conducted by Kirk Schneider, John Galvin, and Ilene Serlin with Rollo May at his retreat home in Holderness, New Hampshire, in the summer of 1987. Drawing from the influence of his forefathers, Freud, Jung, Fromm, Adler, Sullivan, and Rank as well as classical mythology, philosophy, and literature, May gives a passionate explanation of existential psychotherapy and why it is so urgent in today's "quick fix," "gimmick-oriented" society.

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Gimmicks

Kirk Schneider: On behalf of my colleagues, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. May for appearing for this interview, and I'd like to begin right away.

The first question I'd like to ask you, Dr. May, is in light of your important contributions to existential psychotherapy and psychology, how do you feel about the present and future direction of psychotherapy?

Rollo May: Well, I think psychotherapy is facing a very profound crisis. I think the teaching of the fathers—Freud and Jung and Rank and Adler—has been in this crisis almost completely lost.

And the problem is that psychotherapy becomes more and more a system of gimmicks. People have special ways of doing their own therapy. They learn which particular buttons to push. They're taught various techniques . . . so that they can . . . cure this isolated symptom or that. And that wasn't the purpose

Authors' Note: This article is a lightly edited transcription of an interview with Rollo May at his Holderness, New Hampshire retreat in the summer of 1987. The full video version of this transcript can be purchased online at www.psychotherapy.net. The authors wish to thank Dr. Victor Yalom and Charolette Dick, MA for use of their transcription of this interview.

at all, of Freud and Jung and the rest of the really great men who began our field. Their purpose was to make the unconscious conscious. And . . . there's a great deal of difference between them [and the technique-oriented therapists].

Now the gimmick approach leads to a general boredom, and the reason there's so many new systems in psychotherapy that spring up . . . every time you turn around there's a new system—300 or 400 now exist, of this kind of therapy, [or] that kind—the reason that this happens is that people are simply bored. Therapists are bored, and they have to find some new gimmick in order to make it amusing at least to them.

Now they're bored because they deal with the minor problems of life. They patch a person up and send him on again. I don't regard that as real therapy at all. A therapy that is important, as I see it, is a therapy that enlarges a person, makes the unconscious conscious. Enlarges our view, enlarges our experience, makes us more sensitive, enlarges our intellectual capacities as well as other capacities.

This was what Freud was setting out to do. It's what Jung is trying to do. It's what Adler and Rank did. These people never talked about these gimmicks. It just didn't interest them. What did interest them was making a new person. You see, the new possibilities come up. Then you change the person. Otherwise, you change only the way he behaves, only the way he approaches this or that incidental problem. The problem's going to change in 6 months when he'll be back again for some more so-called therapy.

Schneider: Do you feel that the future direction of therapy is this direction of patching people up?

May: Well, that's the great issue. Now I think in the first place, the gimmick approach is dangerous. Because it makes therapy the maker of new selves and isolates the person from the society.

Now Robert Bellah has a lot to say . . . about this in his last book, *Habits of the Heart*, in which he thinks that psychotherapy is on the side of decay. And William Alanson White once said that the people who are now the enemies may be a soft-talking group of therapists who are doing what they do in order to help you.

Now what that really means is that psychotherapy is on the side of the destruction of our future society. Bellah puts that in so many words. This is partly because of the great emphasis on the self. There's no understanding at all of the world in which this person fits. Great emphasis on making myself: I leave my family. I leave my wife. I leave my husband. I leave my children. All of that has to do with—so Bellah believes and I think he's right—has to do with the present forms of psychotherapy that are gimmicks.

All the books you hear about how to do this, how to do that—"Joy, More Joy," *I'm Ok, You're Ok*—all of these are on the side of the gimmicks, if I may call them that. And the great mission of Freud, the great aim of these leaders is entirely different from that.

Schneider: Would phrasing it in terms of durability versus expedience reflect what you're saying?

May: Well, I don't know that there is any word that will reflect it—No, the real distinction is between external gimmicks and the internal capacities, sensitivities, the way of looking at life. Now I think this is what existentialism is all about because existentialists always were for man in the world, using his capacities. Using his or her capacities, and it's a way of dealing with the whole person, with the human being.

So you don't have a bunch of gimmicks when somebody comes in to see you. He's not a bunch of gimmicks. What he is a human being who cannot make a go of his life. And that may be a quite variegated problem, but it's a very profound problem. And this is why the existentialists developed.

See, it's amazing, the question you asked me takes me right into what existentialism is all about.

John Galvin: In a sense, you're asking the present day therapist to give up these gimmicks. And . . . many of them fear that if they give up the gimmicks, they don't know what to do when they're with a client.

May: Alright. Let them go back and learn something about real therapy. You see, this is exactly the problem: you take away the gimmicks, they don't have anything to do.

Now that means in the first place that they're quite trained wrongly. I have a seminar in which I train graduate therapists. I believe that they need to learn much more about the classics. They need to learn how human beings down through the ages have met their anxiety and have achieved their insights, their outlook.

Now how the person is historically is very important, and this is left out of psychological training. I would . . . certainly hope that what could be taught is that the royal road to the unconscious, as Freud says, [is] dreams and dream analysis. And that's the way to find this unconscious.

Now the students that I deal with in my course out there in San Francisco are very well-trained, very good-intentioned people, and they bring up cases during the 6 or 8 months that we work together, and not one of them ever brings up a dream of the patient. They're there not to be concerned with the unconscious. What they're there for, they think, is to use some gimmicks that they've learned. Now those are the kind of people who get very bored after 2 or 3 years.

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Schneider: Could you say a little more about the unconscious from the existential point of view? We know the Freudian version of the unconscious.

May: Well, I think the unconscious is to be understood as the farther reaches of consciousness. Consciousness begins only at the time when the unconscious begins also. That's between the child's first and second years of life. That is when you become shy. That's when you can lie, as Sartre said, "The lie is a behavior of transcendence."

Now the unconscious is simply the further expansion of what you and I are concerned with in our reverie, certainly in our dreams, but I think also very much in our myths. The myth is another royal road to the unconscious. And the myth is a way of making sense first of this senseless life that most people have to live, and then in this making sense, new things arise: new ideas, new insights. And these are expressions of the subconscious, I'd say, and sooner or later the unconscious.

Galvin: It seems that most people are looking for therapy that will not ask of them too much.

May: Yes, I know. Those are exactly the people I never work with.

Galvin: So in many ways, we should be asking more from our patients.

May: Certainly. Their life is at stake. That's the way Freud saw it. It's certainly the way Jung saw it. The life of this person is at stake. Can you broaden this human being? Can you enlarge him so that he then can go out into the world, perhaps not even with his problem solved, but with a new way of approaching his problems? And this new way of approaching them will be hopefully a way that broadens him or ways that [yield] new value to life, new sensitivities on his part. This makes life infinitely more interesting for him. So I think that's really what therapy ought to be about.

Schneider: So therapy is an education.

May: Well, education was a good term for it. But I think it is re-education. It is doing what ought to come naturally.

Now our age is the age of therapy precisely because our society has disintegrated. We are in a transitional age. What worked for the 19th and 18th and 17th centuries does not work anymore. And this occurs—it occurred at the Renaissance. There was a great burst of therapy and therapists then. It occurred at the decay of Greek civilization, first and second centuries BC. And there, there also was a great burst of people calling themselves therapists.

There were no philosophers anymore. The philosophers' lecture halls looked like outpatient clinics, is the way E. R. Dodds puts it. These philosophers dealt with anxiety, how to sleep at night when your palms sweat, how to get up before a crowd of people. The philosophers dealt with gimmicks. And it's very clear that [this occurred at] the decay of Greek civilization, very clear that [it occurred at] the decay of the Middle Ages when there was witchcraft, sorcery, all these pseudo-psychological things that really show how anxious people were to find themselves. And it turns out to be mostly gimmicks.

Now we are at that age. Whether we can survive it, of course, nobody knows, but I think this is what existential therapy is all about.

Schneider: You're saying that existential therapy is in great part about helping people to be more in touch with their natural aspects, natural elements.

May: Natural capacities.

Schneider: Natural capacities. Can you portray for us a little bit about what that might look like, one who is in touch with one's natural capacities?