

Being in Good Trouble

Applying Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy in 2017

I am honored and humbled to be receiving the Rollo May Award for Independent and Outstanding Pursuit of New Frontiers in Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy. Thank you for acknowledging me, my work and close to 400 diverse individuals I have trained. Since 2000 I have led existential-humanistic trainings in California, Arizona, Colorado, Canada, England, Mexico, and Russia. These trainings, titled Unearthing the Moment, have taken place through a nonprofit organization, the International Institute for Humanistic Studies, which I founded with the full support of my mentor, Jim Bugental.

The Institute is dedicated to providing scholarships to minority students including but not limited to Asian, African, African-American, Hispanic, and LGBTD to learn the theory of existential-humanistic psychotherapy and apply this profound theory of living and dying to diverse populations with diverse challenges. The mission statement of the Institute is to touch the world with heart and mind, and to inspire hope, compassion, courage, resilience and tolerance by building bridges of communication between cultures. We are proud to be an APA CE provider for each of the trainings in the U.S. A great start, and I continue this work with passion at age 70 and still going strong!

There have been 14 recipients of the Rollo May award since 1996. My mentor Jim Bugental was the first recipient and now twenty-one years later I am the first woman recipient, which brings me to “Being in Good Trouble,” the topic of my talk.

The phrase “being in good trouble” was first used by Congressman John Lewis, the representative from the state of Georgia. He was told by his parents, “Don’t get in trouble.” But as Mr. Lewis said when speaking about the Civil Rights Movement, “Dr. King and Rosa Parks inspired me to get in trouble. Good trouble.”

And we presently have two female Republican senators who are in good trouble: Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski voted against the “skinny bill.” And Senator Mazie Hirono, battling kidney cancer, stood strong with her voice on the floor of the Senate. I salute each and every one of these remarkable women leading our democracy.

My nomination was made by my former trainee, Louis Hoffman, bringing him into good trouble. Thank you, Louis. It is because of your courage and perseverance with my nomination that I stand here today.

Change can only come from current leaders here and everywhere being in good trouble by being wisely brave, sufficiently outraged, and, at times, willing to lose their jobs. In addition, the most difficult challenge is that they must be willing to do their own inner work so that when they press for change, they are not just being obnoxious. As leaders embrace their gifts, stop their projections, and learn to listen to their inner voice, they can make a difference. Courageous leaders may either work for change within existing organizations or start something new outside of them. I am somewhat on the outside of APA with this institute and its trainings that primarily focus on the importance of the human relationship as the core to change. This award reminds APA each year of the therapeutic relationship as the central change agent.

Personally “being in good trouble” started as a child in Savannah, Georgia. At about age five I asked my mom why the maid could not eat with us. She said she would tell me when I got older. My good trouble answer was, “Well, I am not older so I am going to take my plate downstairs and eat with the maid.” (Which I did without getting punished.) My mom was shocked by my determination, but wise to let me go. Sitting beside the ironing board later and talking with “the help,” who started at age 16. I never did learn why she was not allowed to eat with us, but I entered the school of compassion and love through our very close relationship. She is now age 86, lives in Maryland and had joined me today. Geneva thank you for your loving guidance.

What is “Being in Good Trouble” in being the first woman to receive the Rollo May award? Well, it means taking courage to state and act on the actual.

There are many, many other women who walked and are walking before me who should have and could have stood here, so I stand here representing not only myself but many dedicated existential-humanistic female colleagues — those departed and those vibrant and alive leading each of us in being in good trouble.

I would like to acknowledge some of these women. In alphabetical order they are: Sara Bridges, Elizabeth Bugental, Charlotte Buhler, Heather Cleare-Hoffman, Eleanor Criswell, Connie Fischer, Susan Gordon, Jean Houston, Norma Lyman, Maureen O’Hara, Geri Olsen, Cornelia Pinnell, Natalie Rogers, Ilene Serlin, Louise Sundarajan, Frances Vaughn, and Elisa Velasquez. There are many others who are contributing to individual and collective change, whether the contribution is evidence-based or not. Each has stood up and stood out in her dedication to what Rollo May wrote in 1983, “In moving through rather than away from anxiety the individual not only achieves self-development but also enlarges the scope of his or her world.” Each of these women has certainly enlarged the scope of her world *and* the worlds of many others. Perhaps being in good trouble today would be for each of us to personally acknowledge the women around us who continue to contribute without an external award or acknowledgement.

Look around you now, yes now, not later. Of course I would ask you to participate. I am not talking at you; I am inviting you to be part of this moment. If you want to acknowledge a female colleague who is not here in silence, fine, or someone nearby right now, please give a nod or verbal thank you to a female here in this room for contributing to the well-being and fulfillment of the many she is serving. I will be silent for a few seconds while some of you quickly use your time to acknowledge a female colleague nearby. Thank you.

Rollo May often asked, “Where are you?” Not “Who are you?” but “Where are you right now?” Questions can get you and your client in really good trouble, good trouble that engages, that strengthens the individual and eventually the world in which they live. Rollo May remained in good trouble throughout his career not relieving the symptoms of anxieties but using

courage to go through these anxieties. He trusted the therapeutic relationship as the change agent.

The problem with evidence-based therapy is that it is partial truth masquerading as complete truth. It is not the complete truth. The relationship is an absolute necessity, and it is currently being researched by many of you to give credence to what we are actually doing. But please do not in your research give up the mystery of the human relationship. Yes, compassion and empathic presence are essential ingredients, but there is a mystery to each relationship that can never be evidence-based or slotted into a diagnosis. The mystery is full of grace and unknowns. I can testify to this fact over and over again. I will name a few experiences for you to ponder the mystery of the therapeutic relationship.

One of the first cases I presented to Jim Bugental went by the name “Schizophrenic.” Yes, that is what she called herself and that is what I presented to Jim. As a young child she had spent many hours with psychiatrists and psychologists — diagnosed, medicated and treated as a schizophrenic. When she arrived in my office as a young adult, she introduced herself as Schizophrenic. I introduced myself as Myrtle and asked her, “Where are you right now?” She said, “I have forgotten my real name and my diagnosis, schizophrenic, is now my name.” Unimaginable, sad but true for that moment. I knew I was witnessing the dark side of many years of evidence-based therapy, which did not attend to her true name, potential, emotional heart, and so much more. I started our work with my name and invited her to find her name outside of Schizophrenic, which she slowly did. Our work together was rich with good trouble, including getting her physician to lower her medications as she began to open to her authenticity through our loving relationship, yes loving. She could quote from many holy books and would relate these quotes to me regularly, which moved me. She had never received attention for what she did best — reciting spiritual texts. She had never had a job and been supported by her prominent father living in D.C. Her courage and confidence grew, and she finally initiated volunteering in the spiritual section of a local bookstore using her gift of quoting spiritual texts, helping others select the book that met their spiritual needs. Very soon the

bookstore hired her. Jim and I relished her departure from her diagnosis and her newly found identity.

At the end of one of her sessions, she shared that her father was coming from D.C. to her next therapy appointment. He wanted to speak with me, that is all she knew. I panicked and called Jim. “What am I going to do?” Jim said in his kind voice, “See him, of course.” I responded, “What if he is coming to express anger to me about her medications? He is so prominent!” Jim reminded me that we did not know why her father was coming. I pulled my courage together and stopped obsessing about the coming session. My mantra was “I do not know,” a very wise mantra!

You might have guessed, her father came to the session with his daughter and was very grateful and gracious. He wanted to tell me in person in front of his daughter, “Thank you for loving my daughter.” He said he could never love anyone, only his work. Can you imagine? Getting in good trouble a father admitting in front of his daughter in therapy that because of who he had become, not because of her, he could not love her. Unimaginable!

In psychotherapy, we are in a human relationship, fraught with all that is unimaginable. One of darkest sides of our work is a client considering and trying suicide. One of my Unearthing the Moment trainees, a tenured therapist, reported the following after attending the trainings.

“I sat with a client who had experienced severe childhood traumas. I knew I could not offer her any reason not to kill herself that she had not heard before so I simply said, “Your life is yours, and I know you want the right to end your pain.” She said, “Finally someone understands. I don’t want to die, I’m just tired of living.”

Death anxiety for each of us, whether a client or therapist, is an essential part of what I focus on in the trainings and psychotherapy. A previous client was a retired therapist who upon retirement, was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Her journey is not my journey now but the similarities are there. I am an aging therapist with a published book, *Awakening to Aging*, and looking

straight into my retirement years. I seem to have missed her loss — the loss of a husband to cancer — but I have experienced many other losses. Death is always in my awareness.

In consultation with Jim concerning her, he only asked me one question, “Have you considered how it will be for you if she dies?” And the tears rolled down my face. “Yes, I have. I will miss her. She is so very real. She touches me deeply.”

He says nothing. He waits in that manner I know so well from three decades of our work together. Case consultation was not “about” the client but rather the lived moment inside of me. I said to Jim, “I am also aware I will miss you when you die. You are real and have helped me to be real with myself and others. Thank you.”

To be real, what more can we ask from each other as therapists — or as human beings? Remember psychotherapy and life are messy and some things can be measured, but some can not. And some things that can NOT be reduced to “evidence-based” are often the most important pieces of our lives.

I now invite you to experience photos I took this year in Bhutan accompanied by “It’s Quiet Uptown,” a song about experiencing the unimaginable from the play *Hamilton*. The link between the Bhutan photos and the song is that both are about overcoming adversity. In the case of *Hamilton*, the song ends with a gesture of forgiveness. Bhutan overcame other political adversities, ending with its citizens being the happiest people on earth. The movement in both does not proceed from “evidence-based” material, but from human relationships and grace. I hope these photos and song will inspire each of you.

THANK YOU.