

A History of Marriage Guidance in New Zealand

A Personal Reflection

Ruth Penny, with David Epston and Margaret Agee

Editors' note: This article gives voice to the memories of Esther Hall, who was a member of the first generation of counsellors in New Zealand. It was written by her daughter, Ruth Penny, based on transcriptions of audiotaped interviews involving David Epston, Esther, and Ruth, and later between Ruth and Esther. Ruth submitted the article in April, not knowing that she was herself terminally ill. Very sadly, less than a year after her mother Esther's death, Ruth herself died of cancer on September 29, 2008. Before she died, Ruth added to the article and asked Margaret Agee to complete it for her. Ruth's own life journey had taken her in her mother's footsteps, to become a highly respected counsellor, supervisor, and trainer in the Auckland community. Ruth was also a leader in the Christian Counsellors' Association. We publish this memoir here, in love and gratitude for the lives of both Esther and Ruth, and for the contribution they have both made to others' lives and to our profession.

Esther Hall began working for the Marriage Guidance Council (MGC) in 1962, as one of the first generation of counsellors in New Zealand.¹ Later she became the Auckland director and one of the national trainers, in a career that spanned 22 years. It has been said, "Good counsellors never retire. They don't get older—they just get better." This would ring true of Esther who, despite "retiring" at the age of 65, kept on being active in the counselling world, and up to the age of 83 was still being invited to lead seminars or to fill in as a relief tutor.

Esther was 86 years old and at war with cancer when the idea of capturing her memoirs was conceived. But despite age and illness, she remained intensely alive, clearheaded, and passionate about both the history and the future of counselling in New Zealand. Much the same could be said of her daughter Ruth, less than a year later.

Parts of this article incorporate extracts from interviews involving Esther, David Epston, and Ruth, wherein she told the story of her involvement with Marriage Guidance, which went on to play such an important part in the history of counselling here in New Zealand. Other parts use verbatims from a discussion between Esther and Ruth a few days before Esther's death. This covered aspects of her motivation and passion for her work, and the kind of legacy she wished to leave behind her.

Following Esther's death and "passing on the mantle" on November 23, 2007, and Ruth's own death on September 29, 2008, this article has become a legacy of two generations rather than one.

In Esther's own words

1962. I was 41 years old, with three children aged seven, eight, and ten. I had wanted motherhood more than anything else, and in the early sixties a woman's place was still seen to be in the home.² Social life and community involvement largely revolved around children and church, and that "should have been enough." But that wasn't the case for me.

I'd had a nursing background, but in that era you couldn't continue nursing once you were married. Being a nurse over the time of the Second World War and following years had allowed me to make a personal and professional contribution and given me a sense of purpose much wider than was generally allowed to my generation of women and mothers. Parenting had brought fulfilment, but now, with my children growing up, I wanted to do more than that.

That opportunity came quite unexpectedly with my introduction to Marriage Guidance at an Auckland women's meeting in 1962. This group, called the Fireside Group, was made up of a number of young mothers from the local church and was focused around social contact and community involvement. Because most married women didn't work in paid employment, it was participation in these sorts of groups that provided a life outside the family and an opportunity to broaden our horizons.

Some evenings at Fireside, we would have a guest speaker who represented a community organisation or service. It was to one of these evenings that Marie Griffin, who worked for the Home and Family Centre, came and she introduced us to the plan for developing a counselling agency called Marriage Guidance (MG).

The impetus for Marriage Guidance came out of the 1954 Mazengarb report regarding youth offending. It was decided that since these children came mostly from what were referred to as "broken homes", something should be done to strengthen

nuclear families.³ Pockets of committees had formed around New Zealand and a steering committee was appointed by the government to decide what could be done. This group included people such as Marie Griffin, Ralph Unger, Elsie Davidge, Ian Jenkin, Dr Stan Mirams, and Dr Jim Robb. From this group came the decision to recruit volunteers to train as counsellors. They were not to be drawn from the ranks of professionals, but to be just people who liked people, who were open to others and who were willing to learn on the job. Learning as we went was the only way we could go as there weren't really any models other than psychotherapy, psychology and psychiatry at that time. New Zealand didn't have any "counselling" as we've come to know it now.⁴ The services of the MGC needed to be more widespread and accessible than what was currently on offer, so it really was a matter of creating a new model using "non-professional" people who would be willing to work on a volunteer basis.

It was a pretty radical move for MGC to consider training non-medical and non-professional people, and Carl Rogers' theories were at the basis of that. Rogers' research into the effectiveness of different models led him to believe that the ability to form quality relationships with clients was equally as important as techniques or professional rank. He reckoned that the personality and personal qualities of the counsellor were essential if a relationship of openness, trust and honesty was to be formed. He made links between the level of growth for the client and the level of genuineness and availability of the counsellor.

This move away from professional technique to personal availability put a whole new slant on who might make a good counsellor. Whereas once this was seen as the field of academics and professionals, Rogers introduced different criteria based on the ability to demonstrate warmth, acceptance, respect, empathy, and congruence. This opened space for a whole range of people who, like me, were intelligent enough but hadn't had the opportunity for higher education. Selection was based on who we were, not on our qualifications, or whether or not we had led conventional lives. What they were looking for were people who had come to terms with their own lives and who were open to the lives and experiences of others.

Those sorts of criteria made for a surprisingly rigorous selection process. First, there was local selection where we met with the committee, with a doctor who talked about our life experiences, and a psychiatrist who looked at our family of origin. We also went to the university where we did IQ testing to ensure that we could study at a tertiary level, and were put through a series of psychological tests like the Rorschach ink blots and MMPI.⁵

If we passed that, the next stage was a selection weekend in Wellington. Once again we had three separate interviews, one looking at present family life, one about family of origin, and a group interview where we were observed for group skills and our capacity for such criteria as tolerance and acceptance of others. That was followed by an interview with a psychologist after he had assessed our test results. The rest of the weekend was spent in groups discussing case studies. Of course, there were “plants” in the group—competent people who were watching our interactions and listening to what we said and the attitudes we expressed, to see if you were dogmatic or whether you seemed at ease with different sorts of cultures. We didn’t know that at the time, as all of us in the group were strangers to one another. With a selection process that thorough, it became obvious who would be suited and who wouldn’t—some hadn’t a clue really.

It probably seems strange these days that such rigorous demands would be put on people who were working on a volunteer basis. It didn’t seem strange then. In fact, it felt like a privilege to me to be offered this opportunity, and I really liked the idea that it wasn’t going to cost me anything to get an education.

There was a huge stock of women who were married and unemployable, and a climate where many men felt devalued if their wives went out to work. So, for women who weren’t into bridge or golf and who wanted something useful to do, voluntary work was ideal. Not surprisingly, most of the candidates were women, though there were a few men, mostly teachers or clergymen.

Much of the training took the form of residential weekends in Wellington, and that was pretty exciting for a suburban mother! Of course, to be able to do that with three children at home required a supportive partner who was willing to take over the reins, and that certainly wasn’t the social norm.

Training also took place in local training groups, doing case studies, and reading extensively. After the second weekend in Wellington, we were allowed to see one client per week, and for the first year we had one hour of supervision for every hour of client work. It’s a very privileged way to learn—rather like an apprenticeship.

Because there weren’t counsellors as such in New Zealand at that time, our first trainers and supervisors were psychiatrists and psychotherapists. Rogerian principles were the basis, but the flavour was distinctly psychotherapeutic in terms of individual, long-term clients. There was no model for joint work, so when we first started seeing clients as MG counsellors, we had no idea of working with couples. I would see the wife and someone else would see the husband. Both counsellors would make very good relationships with their clients and we couldn’t understand why, when these two very

nice people got together, they weren't the same at all. What happened is that we each became advocates for our own client and couldn't make any sense out of each other's case notes. After a few months we realised that approach wasn't working so we decided to try a foursome. Well, that was a spectacular disaster! Both counsellors would be standing up for their clients, and it would be like two people with their lawyers and four people fighting instead of two.

It probably took about a year before Auckland counsellors started experimenting with joint counselling. It really was experimental. There were no models to follow for meeting with couples. Even internationally, the only people we knew of doing joint counselling were at the Tavistock Clinic in London. So it was about finding our own way, and all the different MGC branches were trying new and innovative things and reporting back their findings to the head office in Wellington. We take couple counselling so much for granted now, that it's hard to imagine it's being totally unknown 40-odd years ago.

Over the first few years, a counselling model different from psychotherapy began to evolve. Carl Rogers' theories opened the door to different practitioners, and working with couples brought in a different emphasis. The focus moved off the two individuals and instead was given to the interaction and relationship between them—the “invisible client.” Attending to the relationship rather than the individual required quite different skills, and newly emerging Gestalt practices became very useful here, especially immediacy skills and the understanding that what takes place in the counselling room is likely to be a microcosm of the couple's lives.

However, there was still an expectation that we would work long term with our clients. The fact that they didn't pay facilitated the possibility of that. It was only a few years later that it was decided that people should make some sort of financial contribution, no matter how small, to encourage commitment to the process.

When we were first trained, the goal of counselling was seen as being “insight”. It was assumed that insight alone would lead to change, but we began to discover that, in fact, it didn't always. Insight might happen, but behaviour remained the same. About that time, behavioural counselling and Gestalt emerged and we all leapt on that and began merging Rogerian philosophies with other therapies.

The next big change occurred when the Matrimonial Proceedings Act became legislation in 1968, and the Domestic Proceedings Act in 1970. A number of counsellors were appointed as Court Conciliators, and the courts allowed couples three free counselling sessions if they were having difficulty coming to a settlement agreement.

That brought about a huge learning curve because, with only three sessions, there was an urgency to get results. The counselling process, of necessity, became much more targeted and more succinct. There came to be more emphasis on the “here and now,” on the goals of the client, and on what needed to happen for change to occur. Whereas earlier, it was common to see your clients for six months, now supervisors would question what you were doing if there was not noticeable progress after six sessions. What happened was that the techniques that worked in Court Conciliation then filtered into general counselling situations. I guess you can’t help but use new tools when you find them to be valid. I personally think that Court Conciliation changed the whole philosophy of couple counselling because it offered something quite different from psychotherapy—and it worked!

While all these developments and changes were happening in the counselling field, MGC was also making inroads into education. Tutors started going into schools and taking classes on relationships, self-awareness, and sexuality. This started around the late 1960s and continued until legislation came in that said only trained teachers could take the subjects. This was another area that grew and changed as it went on.

Initially this programme was only taken with students who were at UE level [now Year 12]. Then it was discovered that the “at-risk” kids who left school at fifteen missed out. It gradually began to be run for younger and younger secondary students. Then it was recognised that some intermediate school kids were already sexually active, so the programme kept being offered to younger students until it was running even in the primary schools. While this was happening, the focus was also coming back to parents and their role, so gradually MGC tutors began to do more community work, such as pre-marriage courses.

MGC later became Relationship Services,⁶ and is in many ways now a very different organisation. The days of a few pioneering volunteers are long gone. Many of those original members are dead now. Many of their innovative discoveries and insights are now so commonplace that their “radical” nature is all but forgotten.

Many things have changed. There are skills, models, philosophies, and knowledges available now that were unknown when we started, and counselling itself no longer suffers under the stigma it once did, either for the client or for the counsellor. With demand for services constantly increasing, counselling has once again become the work of professionals.

My personal hope is that the need for qualifications and academics will not take the place of personal integrity and genuineness in the counsellor. Carl Rogers’ core values

of warmth, respect, availability, empathy, and congruence are harder to teach than techniques and skills, but I remain a firm believer that it is the quality of relationship that heals, and that quality is determined by who we are, not by what we know.

As I become older I worry less about using the academically approved words and being politically correct. At bottom line, for me, counselling is about relationship, and relationship is about love. In my later years, Rogers' phrase "unconditional positive regard" came more and more to sit in my head as a synonym for "love". We get afraid of the word "love" and the exploitation and confusion that can come with that word. Let us never forget that within the nature of that word itself also lies the greatest key to healing, joy, and growth.

In Ruth's own words

Walking in Esther's footsteps was not an easy path to follow. It's never easy being the child of someone who has been significant in their field of expertise, and initially I avoided counselling because of the sensed expectation to prove myself worthy of wearing Esther's shoes. However, having been brought up from the age of eight with meat, veggies, and Carl Rogers at every meal, I was saturated with ideas about developing relationships and increasing levels of personal awareness and integrity. From a young age, I saw relationships differently from the way many of my peers did. Settled deep inside me because of Mum's example, I came to see people and relationships as sacred and precious, so the friendships I made were deep and few. Many remain the closest friendships I now have, and it is amazing to see how years apart have not diminished the levels of love, connection, or support. Experiences of deep, "real" conversations going on around me made me quite inadequate at party small-talk until I discovered my "sanguine" side, and have been a party animal ever since.

I cannot think of a time when I saw Esther treat anyone with anything less than exquisite care and graciousness, whether that person was a friend, a checkout operator, or a child she met on the beach. The benchmark for "non-possessive love" that Esther embraced from Carl Rogers never faltered in her professional or private life. Her constant, daily habit of asking herself, "What would Love do? How would Love respond?" shaped her day-to-day living and relating, and this is the greatest inheritance she has passed on to me.

Esther always believed that there was a source of Love greater than herself, and she learned early what it meant to allow herself to lean in to that and rest in the knowledge that where her resources and patience ran out, there was a Love that would hold both

herself and the person she was with. That knowing brought a profound sense of peace, both to her professional and private lives.

It has only been in the last fifteen years or so that Esther's "knowing" has become my own, and I cannot begin to explain the depth of change that has made in my client work, or the depth of peace it offers me as I face the inevitable goodbyes I am having to say to clients, friends, and family. I can trust this "holding Love," knowing that I might be out of the picture, but the source of Love will remain undiminished and unailing.

I learnt and experienced a great deal about active listening skills and communication techniques just by being around a master craftswoman. However, the greatest legacy that she passed on to me is a philosophy, a way of being, and a set of attitudes about people and about life.

For all her warmth and gentleness, Esther was also a fiery, stroppy pocket-dynamo, who would fight tenaciously for the values and beliefs she held most sacred. She was unshakeable in her belief that love would find a way to release the intrinsic goodness that people carry within themselves. Her constant affirmation of people and her ability to see what was below the surface taught me that we see what we learn to look for. I began my life looking into others for what might hurt me. Somewhere along the line, Esther's mantra has steered my vision to look for what is good, for what can be admired and respected, and for what flashes I see of "holding love." I cannot believe how liberating this has become, or how much more richly I now see the world and those I share it with.

All my life, Esther modelled an amazing generosity in the way she would give of herself to other people. It is a rare quality and it is lovely. I think I've had that passed on to me as well, along with Esther's resilience, that can take the hard knocks and the disappointments that are inevitable at times when you commit yourself to people who have been profoundly hurt. Here's where Esther's mantra that "love will find a way," and her example of finding love greater than oneself, has become my personal life-source in both my relationships and in my ability to face death without fear or regret.

So what legacy might I leave? Some deeply treasured relationships where I know that the seeds of my own and Esther's values have been planted deeply and nurtured well. There was a blessing service arranged for me last week which I was too sick to attend, but my friends were there and were asked to come forward and stand in my place. For me, the liberating realisation, when I heard this, was the certainty that when I die, these people who have invested in my life, as I have invested in theirs, will in fact stand in my place and pick up my mantle.

Notes

- 1 The Marriage Guidance Council of New Zealand was conceived in Christchurch in 1948, and after a “troubled infancy” the organisation was established in Auckland in 1956, and evolved through “renaissance” and “rebirth” in 1960, as it grew in strength. The history of the organisation from 1949 to 1989 was documented by Daly (1990).
- 2 For further reading about the social history of New Zealand women, see, e.g., Park (1991).
- 3 The social conditions that were the cause of public concern at the time are outlined by Daly (1990, p. 11). See also Hermansson (1999).
- 4 As an historical point of comparison, a pilot guidance counselling scheme was trialled in secondary schools for more than two years in the early to mid-1960s, and guidance counselling in secondary schools was formally established by the government in May 1966 (Winterbourn, 1974). Groups of counsellors began to meet informally for networking and support, as guidance counselling positions were established in a wider range of schools. Between 1967 and 1974, local associations of guidance counsellors were formed in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch, culminating in the formation of the New Zealand Counselling and Guidance Association, forerunner of NZAC, at the first national conference in 1974 (Hermansson, 1999).
- 5 Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory.
- 6 The change from Marriage Guidance to Relationship Services occurred in 1994 (see <http://www.marriageguidance.org.nz/>).

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