

RUE L. CROMWELL, Ph.D.  
1928 – 2020

## A Collegial and Professional Obituary

Longtime psychologist, scholar, author, member of the constructivist psychology community, and friend Rue L. Cromwell died on December 9<sup>1</sup>, 2020. Rue was 92 years old.

Rue Levelle Cromwell was born in Linton, Indiana on November, 17, 1928, the son of George H. Cromwell and Mary Iona Cromwell. He was preceded in death by his brothers Howard Don Cromwell and Harold Dean Cromwell and son Joseph Cromwell. He is survived by his wife Ginni H. Zhang, daughter Donna Wailes, daughter Lita Ferdinand, son Lincoln Cromwell, daughter Wyn Frost, foster son Steve Cromwell (Thanh), five grandchildren, and two great grandchildren.

A detailed description of Rue Cromwell's professional vita would be a poor — as well as prohibitively lengthy — way to characterize the impact of this highly impactful researcher, writer, and mentor. Suffice it to say that he published more than 125 journal articles, book chapters, edited books, and authored books from his first journal article as a graduate student in 1954 to his final book published in 2015. He made substantial research contributions in a wide array of areas, from childhood mental retardation, emotional disturbance in children, psychological and stress factors associated with myocardial infarction, attention and information processing in schizophrenia, personal construct psychology, and posttraumatic stress reactions. However, his most prized scholarly “products” were *not* his publications, his research grants, his Distinguished Professorship at the University of Kansas, or the many honors and awards he received from numerous professional organizations. Instead it was the students he mentored and their

achievements that Dr. Cromwell valued as his highest contributions to society.

I was fortunate to be one of the many doctoral students mentored by Rue Cromwell. During my time under his tutelage, we developed a very close relationship (the deeper reasons for which are beyond the scope of this obituary)... a relationship that continued to thrive in the decades following the completion of my Ph.D. Through that relationship, I have come to know much of Rue Cromwell's history (career-related and otherwise), and his own reflected take on that history, thus giving me a privileged and admittedly non-objective perspective into the breadth and depth of impact that this man had during his 92 years of life.

I will begin with a broad-brushstroke overview of Rue Cromwell's life in psychology, one which I know he endorsed given that I helped him edit it as the “About the Author” section of one of his last published books, *Being Human: Human Being: Manifesto for a New Psychology* (Cromwell, 2010). What follows is excerpted from our iterative personal communications as he completed the volume:

Rue L. Cromwell grew up among the hills shoved up by glaciers during the last ice age at the southern boundary of the ice sheet. From small-town Linton, Indiana, he entered nearby Indiana University and found himself in a thriving place. The list of famous people who entered and influenced Rue's road into academic psychology reads like a who's-who in the field. W. N. Kellogg, the researcher of ape- and child-development, taught Rue in his

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<sup>1</sup> Although some accounts and memorials place the date of Rue's death on December 8, I received a text message from his wife on December 9 that he “passed away this morning,” and the official death certificate records December 9, 2020 as the date of death.

first psychology course; shortly thereafter he hired Rue as an assistant surgeon and caretaker of dogs in his laboratory of learning and conditioning. W. K. Estes was Rue's first lab instructor in research methodology. B. F. Skinner performed the rituals to induct Rue's cohort into the Psi Chi honorary fraternity of accomplished psychology undergraduates. Then, in Rue's senior year, J. R. Kantor confronted the undergraduates with dualism, reductionism, and other notions that have mired and corrupted contemporary psychology. The knowledge base that Rue and his classmates had assembled seemed blown asunder.

Next door, Alfred Kinsey was finishing his first opus, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. He was unaware of the acclaim and attack to come. Next door in the other direction, Herman Müller was claiming the Nobel Prize for identifying genetic mutations from irradiating fruit flies. Across campus, Ross Lockridge Jr. was finishing the novel *Raintree County*. In it a returning Civil War soldier has a distant view of a girl with a mole on her breast, swimming in the nude. Like the clamor over Kinsey, the flap over this novel foreshadowed the sexual revolution.

The university president Herman B Wells, busy quelling these fires in defense of academic freedom, took time to build a music department (now considered the best in the U.S.) mainly from retired Metropolitan Opera performers. He organized the first-ever collaboration between a university and industry in a double blind study: the stannous fluoride effect upon tooth decay. It resulted in Crest toothpaste. He accepted an appointment from President Harry Truman to design the postwar higher education program in Germany. With it he founded the Free University of Berlin. He delighted the Bloomington students by getting lost and arrested in the Russian sector after festive dining.

In the summer of 1950 Rue left this Hoosier kaleidoscope for an Air Force that was switching from khaki to blue uniforms. Within

days the onset of the Korean War froze all discharges. Meanwhile, VA neuropsychiatric hospitals were being flooded with World War II veterans, and a call was issued for candidates to enter graduate training in clinical psychology. Rue's orders directed him out of the military into The Ohio State University. Rue completed his master's thesis with George A. Kelly, who was developing personal construct theory. His Ph.D. dissertation was under the direction of Julian B. Rotter, who was creating social learning theory.

After his doctorate Rue joined Nicholas Hobbs at George Peabody College to supervise doctoral fellows in mental retardation research. No senior person with both research and clinical skills was available. Thus, Rue's early doctoral students were of his age or older.

A sabbatical leave was spent at the National Institute of Mental Health with David Shakov in schizophrenia research. This experience greatly molded Rue's future. He became Director of Research in Psychiatry, Vanderbilt University. His interests broadened to include participation in the Nashville civil rights movement and a private practice in psychotherapy. Research included stress, nursing management, recovery from acute myocardial infarction; diagnostic conceptions of emotionally disturbed children, and sensory/cognitive processes in schizophrenia. As Chief of Psychology, Lafayette Clinic, Detroit, the schizophrenia research took on an interdisciplinary perspective. A shift in focus took place from evaluating only the long-treated patient to examining the normal/untreated siblings, parents, children, and other relatives who were genetically at risk for schizophrenia. "Town work" continued in racial justice.

The research on high-risk populations led to a Professorship of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Pediatrics at the University of Rochester (NY). A focus centered upon markers, the subtle signals that emerge in both patients and healthy relatives before the eventual madness of the disorder.

Finally, accepting the M. Erik Wright Distinguished Professorship in Clinical Psychology at the University of Kansas, Rue and his students (Rue's Crew) diversified to include depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and the effects of early abuse.

Rue and I arrived at the University of Kansas in the same semester, the fall of 1986...I a first-year graduate student, and Rue the newly-recruited inaugural holder of the M. Erik Wright Distinguished Professorship in Clinical Psychology. After a job interview in which I brazenly (over-?) depicted my prowess with computers and technical laboratory equipment, Rue hired me as his research assistant to establish his schizophrenia research laboratory at KU. Apparently, my rapid learning curve managed to overcome any hyperbole that might have been present in my initial sales-pitch, and Rue came to trust me. We began having deep and detailed theoretical conversations, jointly planning his next research projects related to schizophrenia, as well as my own research projects in a variety of areas ranging from sexual disorders to posttraumatic stress. Rue's willingness (and ability) to go far afield from his core research interests to mentor a student in whom he saw promise seemed unique among the faculty in the program. It was only later—years later, when I tried (and largely failed) to emulate that breadth of competency in mentoring graduate students of my own—that I realized just how rare a gift this was.

I completed my degree in 1991 under Rue's mentorship, and joined the family of Rue Cromwell protégé's linked through Rue back to the founder of academic psychology, Wilhelm Wundt, in only six generations of dissertation advisors: Rue Cromwell, Julien Rotter, C. M. Loutitt, Robert Yerkes, Hugo Münsterberg, then Wundt. That academic lineage, and Rue's pride in sharing it with me, has always made me feel viscerally connected to the field that has defined my entire professional career.

In addition to theoretical and technical research conversations extending well after I left KU, Rue and I used every medium available to us...telephone, U.S. mail, fax machine, then e-

mails, and even video-chats...as well as occasional conference meet-ups and in-person home visits to continue our communications. We published several things together, but we also analyzed each other's poems, co-composed poems (passing added stanzas back and forth via e-mail), shared and discussed folk music, commiserated and analyzed our relationships with our spouses and children, and even analyzed our own relationship with one another. But mostly, in and through all of these forms of communion, we mostly **shared stories**.

Space will not allow me to share all of the stories that seem quintessentially Rue Cromwell. But there is one story that seemed to come up as a thread that eventually found its way into virtually every deep conversation Rue and I ever shared. When Rue was a teenager, not yet 16 years old, he was made the Waterfront Director at Boy Scout Camp. With so many adult males off to war, only the more elderly Scout leaders remained to oversee the camp. Rue was an excellent swimmer and boatsman, so he was singled out and given this leadership position that would have normally been assumed by a man in his twenties or thirties. Shouldering the life-and-death responsibility of this role, mustering the confidence to be in a position of authority over teens his own age and even older, gave this small-town boy who began his education in a one-room schoolhouse the courage and confidence he would most certainly need to **survive**, let alone thrive, at places like IU and Ohio State. Rue would harken back to the Boy Scout Waterfront in relation to the chutzpah it required to interact as a young assistant professor with Sargent and Eunice Kennedy Shriver to develop and enact the Kennedy Foundation's shift from treatment toward research into the origins and processes of intellectual disabilities. I came to understand that Rue used the endorsement of his competence that was communicated by the senior Boy Scout leaders, and his intense effort that led to his success in the role, to cope with and compensate for the death of his elder brother at Pearl Harbor and the subsequent emotional withdrawal of his mother in response to trauma of such grief.

There is a photograph of Rue during his time as Waterfront Director. Dressed only in swim trunks, he is standing erect with chin high, hands on his hips and arms akimbo. A skinny teenager striking the pose of Tarzan. I met Rue when he was in his late-50s. But that photo is how I picture him in my mind.

As fortunate as I was to share such a close friendship and colleagueship with Rue, I was certainly not the only person who has been thus blessed over the past decades. An additional gift of my relationship with Rue has been that I have come to know and be connected with others in his circle of professional colleagues, confidants, and fellow story-tellers. Some preceded Rue in death, such as Herb Spohn, Fay Fransella, and Trevor Butt (Trevor and Rue continued weekly Skype chats until Trevor's health could no longer sustain them). Others are here to grieve Rue's passing and celebrate his life along with me, such as Walt Katkovsky, Peter Dingemans, Richard Bell, and Rue's very 50<sup>th</sup> and final dissertation student, Richard (Buddy) Saunders.

Let that number sink in: **50** dissertation students mentored by this one man.

Shortly after Rue retired from academic life, he confided in a letter to me that he did have some regrets, chief among them being his lack of close connectedness to his faculty colleagues. Although he regretted this foregone possibility, he accepted it as a compromise that had to be made. Since his days in graduate school, Rue coped with progressive retinitis that made reading and editing increasingly more and more time-consuming as he aged. To attend effectively to his research and to his students meant that something had to give. But I can tell you from first-hand experience, his students did not suffer. And neither did those fellow sojourners with whom he shared his stories.

In closing, I share an excerpted song lyric from one of Rue's favorite folk singers, Tom Taylor. From the moment Rue shared this song with me on an aging cassette tape, I always had in the back of my mind that I would sing it at his funeral. His family having chosen not to have a public service, I share the chorus here:

He told a good story; he smiled a good smile;  
He stretched out the yarn for a good country mile;  
And when it was over, he jumped on his bike;  
He liked what he did, and he did what he liked.

Rest in peace, Rue Cromwell.

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