



Albert Ellis: A Tribute

By Jeffrey K. Zeig

It is with deep sorrow that I received and now report the death of Albert Ellis, Ph.D. Al was born in Pittsburgh on September 27, 1913. Present at his death was his wife, Deborah Joffe Ellis.

I travel to New York City three or four times a year to teach and I frequently have visited Al and Debbie during those trips. For much of the past two years, Al was bedridden and communication was limited. But it was always comforting to witness how much Debbie adored Al. She was devoted, remaining glued to his bedside, attending to his needs and health care. It was her dedication that kept Al alive and comfortable during his arduous final illness.

Al was a great friend of the Erickson Foundation, having presented at numerous meetings beginning with the 1985 Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference. Al graced the podium of every subsequent Evolution Conference, including the 1994 European Evolution Conference. He presented at Erickson Congresses and Brief Therapy Conferences from 1986 to 2003. Al and I served on the faculty of international meetings in Latin America.

My most memorable moments with Al were at the 1988 International Congress on Brief Therapy in San Francisco when we engaged in a dialogue. A dialogue with Al was really destined to be a debate, and Al was a peerless debater, who had engaged countless contributors to psychotherapy, and, well...I wanted to be included on that list. Also, that dialogue served as an opportunity to study more deeply Al's monumental contributions, something I recommend to all clinicians.

The discussion was spirited and when it ended, Al remarked that I had done a good job. Janet Wolfe, his companion of almost 40 years, indicated that Al's pronouncement was high praise.

Al was a complex man. He was driven and dedicated. He was philosophical yet down-to-earth; he was humane and self-aggrandizing. Impossibly cantankerous, and at once familiar, he was "Al," not "Dr. Ellis." Above all, he was efficient and energetic, working 16 hours a day or more.

My best friend, J. Charles Theisen, wrote his Masters Thesis on Al under the supervision of Harold Greenwald at United States International University in San Diego. Knowing Al's gene for efficiency, Chuck scheduled a time for a personal interview on one of Al's cross-country flights, and booked a seat next to him.

Al's approach to therapy and the human condition was earthy -- and filled with humor. Imagine the nasal New York City twang as Al would lead therapists and patients in song at one of his workshops. You see, he'd sometimes borrow a popular tune and put new words to it to reflect important principles from, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).

Al was in Disneyland—at least once. I remember seeing him there on December 13, 1990, the night I rented Disneyland for a private party for attendees of the Evolution Conference. Al in Disneyland was an anomalous sight. And, the image did not last long. He left with his usual flair...after pronouncing an unprintable expletive about his surroundings. My guess is that he went back to the hotel to write another book.

Dedicated to the Institute for Rational Emotive Therapy, which he founded in 1959, almost all of his earnings were donated to the Institute.

In 1965, Al purchased with his personal funds a six-story building on 65th Street in Manhattan that eventually became known as the Albert Ellis Institute. In recent years a newsworthy controversy started brewing about control of the assets of the Institute once Al was removed from its board.

Al was not much for creature comforts. He lived a Spartan lifestyle in a simple apartment on the top floor of the Institute where I visited him twice. Clearly, his contributions to humanity, not his human comforts, were what were important to him. He really wanted people to correct their distorted attitudes and take a more positive and proactive approach to living as sanely as possible in an insane world.

Al was a workhorse. He saw patients and then wrote in between the brief therapy sessions he conducted. And he worked despite prolonged adversity,

including diabetes and profound hearing loss in his later life.

Never was Al one to mince words. He had a fearless integrity combined with dramatic flair. His letters to me were true to form: "I am coming to your (expletive deleted) conference," he would write. Then he would jest that his presence would be sufficient, and that no other experts would be needed.

Perhaps some of my affinity for Al was due to the fact that we were both reared in the Bronx. Al was a New York City institution. His Friday night drop-in groups at the Institute were legendary where participants got to have the REBT message delivered with the sagacity of Woody Allen and the saltiness of Lenny Bruce. Al's obituary was front-page news in the New York Times which was followed by a feature in its Sunday section. His death was noted in detail on New York City television news.

The contributions that Al made to psychotherapy are more numerous than can be recounted here. Therapists of all persuasions were influenced by him. It is impossible to attend graduate school in any psychotherapy discipline without learning the ABCs of REBT.

I frequently use things I learned from Al. I do not know how many times I have shared with patients Al's notion that we are all members of the FFH club: fallible, f++ked-up, human beings. I borrow his description to re-frame with humor patient's negative thinking.

Al's contributions to hypnosis are less well-known, but Al was a fellow of Division 30 of the American Psychological Association, which is the division dedicated to psychological hypnosis. Al published on hypnosis and was proficient in its practice. He presented on REBT and hypnosis at an early Erickson Congress.

Al was an avid spokesman for Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, the method he invented in the mid-1950s and refined throughout his lifetime. A tireless author, he wrote more than 75 books for professionals and the public on wide-ranging topics including human sexuality, relationships, anxiety, depression, and addiction.

Al Ellis's legacy is secure. A 1982 survey indicated that Al was rated ahead of Freud, and second to Carl Rogers, as the most influential therapist among clinical psychologists.

I do not think any therapist treated as many patients as Al did. No therapist wrote as many papers and books as Al did. No expert conducted as many workshops as Al did. No expert is cited more widely in the psychotherapy literature. No presenter made a workshop more interesting and provocative. No therapist in history was more public in demonstrating his clinical work.

Al was a man with a determined attitude, who dedicated his life to the proposition that self-defeating thoughts could be permanently cured by self-determining one's attitude. It is not our circumstances that determine our destiny; it is our attitude about them. Nobody made that proposition plainer, or advocated it more strongly than Al Ellis.