

Retro Review Classic

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Persuasion and Healing: A Comparative Study of Psychotherapy

By: Jerome D. Frank, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1961,

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Persuasion and Healing... gently persuades the reader to reconsider nearly every assumption and idea [of the psychotherapy field] in a clearer and more scientific light.... The first edition still seems revolutionary.
Glenn Treisman, MD, 2005

This is a politically incorrect book, if you subscribe to the limited medical model of psychotherapy presented as the only paradigm in most psychology programs today.
Amazon (US) review

This remarkable book was published just over half a century ago – that is, in 1961 (the third, 1993 edition was co-published with Jerome's daughter, Julia, in 1993). For me it is one of the very best books on therapy I have ever read, and I strongly believe it to be one of the most important and prophetic books written in the history of psychotherapy and counselling. That's quite a big claim, and I hope to justify it in what follows. But in this particular issue of *Self and Society*, which generously celebrates the major contributions to our field of James Hillman and Jerome Liss, I'd like to make some substantial reference to the life and work of Jerome Frank, who died just seven years ago at the age of 95.

Frank (1909–2005) was an American psychiatrist who is widely seen as a giant in the field of psychotherapy research; and much of the recent and current trends and themes in psychotherapy and counselling research can in fact be traced back to Jerome Frank's seminal work. A *summa cum laude* graduate of Harvard University, Frank earned his doctorate from its Psychology Department in 1934 and graduated from its medical school, again *cum laude*, in 1939. In 1940, he joined the Department of Psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins' School of Medicine, where he was considered to be an outstanding student of Adolf Meyer and later, by all accounts, to be an outstanding teacher.

Strongly influenced by social psychologist Kurt Lewin, Frank's important works from the 1960s onwards came out at a time when psychiatry was in great turmoil, suffering from internecine power struggles for dominance between competing psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic viewpoints. As one of a comparatively small tribe of 'clinician scholars', Frank set out to study psychotherapeutic methods and tenets from a comparative viewpoint, and many regard *Persuasion and Healing* as perhaps the most influential book of its kind in the history of the field. Not least, according to an obituary appearing in the Johns Hopkins University Gazette written by Glenn Treisman, MD, 'the book helped heal the schisms that had developed between various academic centers, thereby allowing improved conversations and forward movement in the field'. According to Treisman, it also liberalized thinking about psychotherapeutic treatment and allowed the orthodox psychoanalytical community to foster the development of new types of psychotherapy, including the self-psychology movement. This resulted in the development of many new conceptions about psychotherapy, including family therapy, supportive therapy and subspecialty types of psychotherapy.

These are great accolades, indeed.

Frank was a passionate teacher and mentor, but also an activist: for example, he was instrumental in the founding of Physicians for Social Responsibility, and actively campaigned against nuclear armaments, for human rights and for a humanistic approach to medicine – altogether very much 'one of us', one might say, with a major commitment to the understanding and resolution of political and international conflict, and the promotion of a just society. According to Treisman's obituary, when Irvin Yalom received the prestigious Oscar Pfister prize from the American Psychiatric Association, he opened his remarks by thanking his mentor – Jerome Frank – who had been the very first recipient of the award.

I only have the space for some rather impressionistic comments on the book itself – which I think appropriate, as in my view, anyone in our field who hasn't read this book simply must read it. Its key argument is well summed up on page 53, in which Frank is referring to what he terms 'religious healing':

[M]ethods of primitive healing...raise the patient's expectancy of cure, help him to harmonize his inner conflicts, reintegrate him with his group and the spirit world, supply a conceptual

framework to aid this, and stir him emotionally. In the process, they combat his anxiety and strengthen his sense of self-worth.

And it might well be that the various contemporary Western psychotherapeutic approaches do little if anything more than this themselves (which is not in any way to diminish these achievements) – notwithstanding the professionalising, self-legitimising stories that the various approaches tell themselves about their own efficacy and alleged ‘active therapeutic ingredients’. Some believe that a genuine humility is perhaps one of the most important qualities for all effective healers and therapists to possess – and it is very difficult to read this book and its message with any degree of openness, and not come away feeling very humble about this peculiar work that we therapists do. Thus we read, for example, that ‘the effect of successful psychotherapy seems to be to accelerate or facilitate healing processes that would have gone on more slowly in its absence’ (p. 225).

Each of the book’s chapters notably begins with a tell-tale quotation from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* – a lovely and apposite touch, this; and the so-called ‘Dodo-bird verdict’ in psychotherapy (e.g. Luborsky et al., 1975) has its origins in Frank’s invoking of Alice in this way (‘At last the Dodo said, “Everybody has won, and all must have prizes”’).

In sum, then, the clinical and cultural importance of psychotherapy as a modern Western healing practice might lie far less in the specific techniques that distinguish one ‘brand’ of so-called ‘evidence-based’ therapy from another, but in transcendent factors that are common to all healing relationships, whatever the cultural or historical context (and which, crucially, can’t be ‘trained in’ in a mechanistic procedural way using techniques and skills). Such ‘common factors’ might include the power of therapists/healers/shamen etc. to engender hope and to help mobilise the client’s own healing process (cf. Bohart and Tallman, 1996), the relational dynamics between therapist and client and the ‘alliance’ so co-created, etc. On this kind of view, then, the importance of the therapist being solidly grounded in one (or several) approaches is far less to do with the specific content of the theoretical approaches themselves (which therapists wedded to their approach and associated ‘professionalism’ commonly but erroneously assume), but rather, with ‘processes’ (for want of a better term) that are common to all approaches – and which perhaps tap into something ‘transpersonal’ that is beyond the ambit of scientific, rationalist understanding (cf. the appreciations of James Hillman in this issue). For me, then, *Persuasion and Healing* therefore at least hints at a ‘new paradigm’, ‘post-professional’ approach to therapy (House, 2003) which was at least several decades ahead of its time – and for this reason alone, I just love it! To give just a couple of examples: on pages 11–12, we read that perhaps over 200,000 of the USA’s non-psychiatric physicians ‘use psychotherapy with many of their patients, often without recognising it as such’ (my italics; so much for the professionalising pretensions of

those wishing to make ‘psychotherapy’ into an exclusive, and excluding, regulated activity which denies what Denis Postle terms its ‘PsyCommons’ status – Postle, 2012); and on page 117, we find a welcome popping of the pomposity of therapist ‘expertise’ (cf. Mair, 1997) – ‘One of the occupational hazards of the psychiatrist is the temptation to let himself be seduced into pretending to be an expert about matters in which he has no special competence...’

Persuasion and Healing has been completely revised and expanded, and the 3rd edition, co-written with Jerome’s daughter Julia, came out in 1993, with updated information on topics including self-help, family therapy, psychopharmacology, psychotherapy for the mentally ill, and techniques such as primal therapy and bioenergetics, exploring the influence of ‘healing rhetoric’ in these various activities. But I’ve heard it said that the freshness and challenge of the original 1961 book can hardly be equalled, and it’s that first edition which I’ve been honouring in this particular retro-review. Great books stand the test of time, of course (and are commonly well ahead of it); for me, *Persuasion and Healing* still has great relevance today, and perhaps even more so than when written half a century ago, as it both adopts a scientific approach whilst taking very seriously the kind of intangible, subtle effects that all healing experiences arguably entail, and which ‘new paradigm’ thinking is thankfully increasingly embracing. To take just one example, the fashionable current discussion about the place of the placebo effect in/ and psychotherapy were being discussed in a profoundly insightful way by Jerome Frank well over 20 years ago (e.g. Frank, 1989a, b).

All in all, then, if I were still working in therapy training, this would without doubt be one of the very first books to go on my reading list. 📖

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