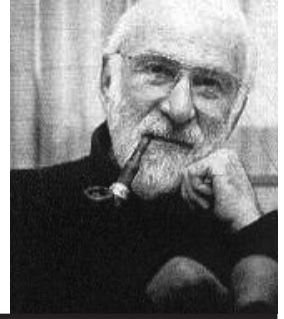


ALVIN R. MAHRER, Ph.D., 1927–2014 – some appreciations



Alvin (Al) Mahrer died peacefully aged 86 at his home in Ottawa, Canada on 13 April of this year. Dr Mahrer was a Professor Emeritus at the University of Ottawa. In 1954, Al graduated from Ohio State University with a doctorate in clinical psychology, then working at the VA Hospital in Denver. Having become president of the Colorado Psychological Association, in 1967 he was appointed professor and clinical director at Miami University, Ohio, and he subsequently held the same positions at the Universities of Waterloo and Ottawa.

Al received many awards and acknowledgments throughout his distinguished career, and he was also a prolific author of books on Humanistic Psychology (see list, below). In 1975, he was made a fellow of the American Psychological Association, and in 1992 he won the Award for Excellence in Research from the University of Ottawa.

With his work his passion, Al wrote over 20 books on his theory of humanistic, experiential psychology and psychotherapy, and he continued his work until his death. A Memorial Service was held for Al in Ottawa on 29th June.

Awards and Acknowledgements

- 2005** – Rollo May Award for Pursuit of New Frontiers, American, Psychological Association, Division 32.
- 2002** – Living Legend in Psychotherapy Award, American Psychological Association, Division 29
- 1997** – Distinguished Psychologist Award, American Psychological Association, Division 29
- 1992** – Award for Excellence in Research, University of Ottawa
- 1975** – Fellow, American Psychological Association

Text drawn and adapted from the obituary in *The Ottawa Citizen*, 22 April 2014 and from http://www.almahrer.com/pb/wp_985f0727/wp_985f0727.html

John Rowan writes:

I met Al in 1983, and went to his house, and saw his therapy room – like no other I have ever seen. There were two huge reclining seats, in black leather, side by side, and hanging between them a huge black microphone. Al would lie in a reclining position, and encourage the client to do the same, and then he would gradually enter into the world of the client, to the point where he could take over the voice of the client and virtually be the client at times. Anything that could get in the way of that process was eliminated.

Accordingly he did not take a history, he did not assess or diagnose the client, he did not set up a

regular meeting, he did not discuss goals or aims. Each meeting was open-ended, and designed to achieve some important change in and of itself. The person who started and the person who finished would be significantly different.

At one point the Canadian Psychological Association tried to pass a law that any practising member must start by taking a history, as professionally correct. Mahrer and some others opposed this quite vehemently, and won the day, so this rule was never adopted. Mahrer was so extreme about this that he told the story of how this man arrived at his door. He invited him in, and told him to sit on one of the chairs, and breathe. The man then explained that he had come to fix the TV!

We got on very well, and exchanged ideas, but then fell out over a couple of things. One – he had an amazing collection of tapes of sessions by various therapists – I remember Rollo May was one of them: he said that Rollo did most of the talking! He kept asking me for a tape, and I said that I would if he would do the same, but he refused – I never did understand why. Secondly, and more important, he produced a book which he intended as a self-help volume, but which seemed to me seriously flawed and off-putting. When I said this (but my review was never submitted for publication anywhere), he took umbrage and reacted very badly. Our correspondence then virtually ceased, which I thought was a great pity. His later books (after 2007) were published by a friend, Howard Gontovnick, which in my view were of a lower standard than his earlier work. However, in 2010 he brought out a striking book entitled *The Origin of a Person*, which marked his conversion to primal therapy – with brilliant effect, and copious references!

I liked the man very much, and was sorry when he lost his wife, and later when he became very ill. He was a force for good, in my opinion.

You can also read moving and informative memorial notices about Al Mahrer at:

http://www.almahrer.com/pb/wp_5d60a904/wp_5d60a904.html

See also <http://www.almahrer.com/>

Books by Alvin R. Mahrer

- Creative Developments in Psychotherapy: v. 1*, Cleveland, Ohio: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1971
- Experiencing: A Humanistic Theory of Psychology and Psychiatry*, Brunner / Mazel Publishers, 1978
- Dreamwork in Psychotherapy and Self-Change*, New York: Norton, 1989
- Experiential Psychotherapy: Basic Practices*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1989
- How to Do Experiential Psychotherapy: A Manual for Practitioners*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1989
- Integration of Psychotherapies: A Guide for Practicing Psychotherapists*, New York: Human Sciences Press, 1989
- Becoming the Person You Can Be: The Complete Guide to Self-Transformation*, Boulder, Colo.: Bull Publishing Co., 2001
- The Complete Guide to Experiential Psychotherapy*, Boulder, Colo.: Bull Publishing Company, 2003
- Theories of Truth and Models of Usefulness*, London / Chichester: Whurr / Wiley-Blackwell, 2004
- The Creation of New Ideas: A Guide Book*, Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books, 2006
- Experiential Psychotherapy – Series I Systems of Psychotherapy - DVD (4310783) (Systems of Psychotherapy APA Psychotherapy Video Series), DVD-ROM – Audiobook*, Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2006
- How Psychotherapy Can Become a Science*, Laval, Quebec: Howard Gontovnick Publications, 2007
- The Other Deeper You*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007
- Psychotherapeutic Change: An Alternative Approach to Meaning and Measurement*, New York: Norton, 2008
- The Manual of Optimal Behavior*, Laval, Quebec: Howard Gontovnick Publications, 2008
- The Optimal Person*, Laval, Quebec: Howard Gontovnick Publications, 2009
- What Is Psychotherapy For? An Alternative to the Profession of Psychotherapy*, Laval, Quebec: Howard Gontovnick Publications, 2010
- The Origin of a Person*, Laval, Quebec: Howard Gontovnick Publications, 2010
- Transformation: A Glimpse Into the Future of How Change Will Come About*, Laval, Quebec: Howard Gontovnick Publications, 2011

A 25th Anniversary Review of **Alvin Mahrer's *How to Do Experiential Psychotherapy: A Manual for Practitioners***, University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 1989, 153 pp, ISBN-13: 978-0776602424

Originally review by **John Rowan** in *Self & Society*, 18 (1), 1990, p. 59

This is the book that Mahrer has been promising for some time, the brief manual based on his workshops. It takes the reader through the regular steps of a therapy session, and gives very full information as to what to expect at each step, and how to deal with all sorts of variations. Those of us who met Mahrer at the 1989 conference of the AHPP at Easthamstead Park, and who were enthused by his approach, now have the full instructions on how to proceed. Two groups of people wanted to pursue this, one in London and one in Bristol, and no doubt they will use this book in their work.

This is a unique and challenging type of therapy, which makes great demands upon the therapist and client alike, but it has the promise of being one of the most successful methods yet devised. It is of course based upon Mahrer's theory of psychodynamics, which says that we all have deeper potentials of which we may or may not be conscious. If we are not conscious of them, this may be because we have set up a barrier of hate and fear between us and them. And because of this barrier of hate and fear, the deeper potential, when it does begin to come to the surface, seems to be bad and dangerous. We then defend against it, using our favourite methods of defence.

What this therapy does is to take the deeper potentials seriously, and positive and vital aspects of the person's life. Behind the barrier of hate and fear, the deeper potential is neither good nor bad in itself. And if the client can get in touch with it in a positive way, it can then be seen in its good form, adding light and colour and depth to the personality, and even sometimes transforming the personality altogether.

The unique thing about experiential psychotherapy done in Mahrer's way is that it enables the therapist actually to speak with the voice of the deeper potential, before the client does. Then this has the power to lead the client gradually deeper into his or her own experience. Ultimately the client adopts and owns and identifies with

the deeper potential which lies within. This is to own more of one's inner realm of being, more of one's own soul.

This is a very realistic book, which continually points out that the client may not be ready to take the next step. It continually cautions the reader not to go too fast, but to make sure that the client is really willing to proceed. This open checking is quite essential to the procedure, which often does feel very risky to the client. Another very strong point about this book is the way in which it lays so much stress on building the bridge between what happens in the client's world.

In retrospect... In October 2014, John Rowan writes: 'Mahrer's method never caught on, perhaps because it is so different from the usual approaches. It entails actually becoming the client, and although this only carries the recent relational methods a stage further, it is different enough to seem quite threatening to most therapists. Working at relational depth is one thing, but actually entering completely into the client's world and speaking from that position is a step too far for most therapists. Mahrer was quite explicit as to how to make this move, but he is far from reassuring as to the problems inherent in doing this. I myself have only done this on rare occasions, but it works fine in practice.'