



## Interview

# Ray Corsini: A Life that Spans an Era

## Conducted by

Robert Perloff  
University of Pittsburgh

Frank Dumont  
McGill University

*Raymond J. Corsini's life spans much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (He was born June 1, 1914.) He is manifestly one of the most important psychologists of his time. The Biographical Dictionary of Psychology lists him as one of the most important psychologists of the past 150 years. He is perhaps best known to scholars and students in counseling and psychotherapy as first editor of Current Psychotherapies (Corsini & Wedding, 2000), the text that has sold more copies than any other in this field. His production of scholarly work in the fields of prison psychology, industrial/organizational psychology, psychotherapy, and educational psychology is demonstrably gargantuan. His work as an encyclopedist and editor of dictionaries is also notable. Indeed, his 4-volume award-winning Encyclopedia of Psychology is widely acclaimed as one of the best in its genre. His The Dictionary of Psychology, now in its second printing, is the most comprehensive ever published in the English language. His oeuvre is impressive. It numbers well over 40 published volumes.*

*Like some of his close friends, Albert Ellis and Heinz Ansbacher, for example, his career has spanned most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has known and closely collaborated with some of the most important of the psychotherapists who have enlivened the North American pantheon of professional psychology. For that reason we have thought it useful to interview him to solicit his recollection of persons and currents of thought that have been so important to our common history. Most important, we have wanted to get Ray's views on himself into the record. His life is a fascinating account of a second-generation immigrant of Italian extraction, whose personal development was enmeshed in several complex ways with the nascent disciplines to which he contributed. In this interview we glimpse again the familiar figures of Moreno, Rogers, Bettelheim, Dreikurs, and numerous others, as well as Ray himself. Constraints on space have forced us to pass over many others.*

*We (the interviewers) formulated a set of questions that we sent to Ray via e-mail. We have re-sequenced his responses and done some minor editing, whilst respecting the idiom as well as the substance of his responses. Throughout this process we felt free to ask additional questions that were prompted by some of his responses. Our questions are in bold print. The interview follows.*

### **Ray, what do you consider your major contributions to psychology—in particular, to general psychology?**

I suppose that every one of my more than 100 articles and over 40 books have some general merit since all were accepted by editors of respected journals or publishers. Although I am a clinical psychologist, my interests are diverse. For example, I created several psychometric tests and explored the relationship of personal data such as body type, birth date, and measured intelligence to criminal career paths. (Interestingly, I found a correlation between physical attractiveness and crime type). But I consider my dictionary of psychology (Corsini, 1999) first in importance relative to general psychology. A good dictionary should be on every psychologist's desk. That dictionary took ten years of practically constant work to complete. I spent three years planning it, making visits to various university libraries as well as the Library of Congress. I spent a lot of time studying other dictionaries of psychology and psychiatry in order to get the best ideas for this new dictionary. I also attended APA congresses for the purpose of asking psychologists (I interviewed about 100 in all) what they wanted in a dictionary. Then I sent letters to 30 commercial publishers asking them to publish my projected dictionary. It was rejected by all of them. I then asked 30 non-commercial publishers such as the APA and various university presses and again was rejected—until finally Taylor & Francis, a British publisher that I had spoken to at an APA meeting, suddenly called me, and a contract was signed. Then it took seven years to complete the book with the help of a clerical assistant and more than 100 psychology experts as well as some physicians.

After this, at my request, the publisher hired six psychologists to do a recheck. Finally, Alan Auerbach and Frank Dumont edited the whole dictionary—everything to get the best product possible. The result: a volume that contains 27,000 definitions (compared to other dictionaries of psychology that typically have about 10,000 definitions) plus 10 appendixes including about 1000 mini-biographies of people who have been important in the history of psychology. A paperback edition has come out in which some minor changes were made.

I also edited two 4-volume encyclopedias and two condensations of them. Herb Reich, an executive at John Wiley, estimated it would take me about 7 years to do the first edition of the first 4-volume work. I bet him I would do it in 2 years. In fact, it took 18 months from contract to final submission, and it won several awards. In contrast, my doctoral thesis was 17 manuscript pages in length and 7 pages in print (1956). It may have been the shortest dissertation ever written as far as I know. Right now there are four books out to publishers including what I consider my most important book, *Individual Education*, which has so far been rejected by two publishers.

I am now 88, am working on a book on current religions, and have several other projects on the drawing board.

**Tell us what led you into the field of psychology. What path did you follow?**

This may be an unbelievable story to some. After I graduated from elementary school at age 14 (74 years ago) I decided that I wasn't smart as I was ranked 18<sup>th</sup> out of a graduating class of 35 students and had never once made the monthly honor roll. Against my mother's wishes I refused to go to high school and found a job as an errand boy in the New York dress industry. After a year-and-a-half of working, I decided (in 1929) to go to high school and eventually graduated in 1933 with average grades. Then, to my surprise, I found that I could get a free college education at the *City College of New York* because my scores on the New York State Regents Tests were so high. I didn't want to go to college, but my mother's dentist told her that I could learn at CCNY to be a dental mechanic. When I went to register I found that dental mechanics was not offered, and I had to register for English, French, and calculus. Six weeks later the dean of the school interviewed me and told me that all three of my teachers had recommended that I quit—and I did. He didn't remember that he had interviewed me and 19 other students because we had had the highest scores on the Regents Test among the 2000 entering students.

I then was employed by Civilian Conservation Corps as a laborer. After several months I tired of that and came back home, went back to CCNY, (mostly at night), and graduated after 7 years. I earned a C-minus average—that placed me in the lowest academic decile. The Depression was still going strong, and I couldn't find a job, so I registered in the *CCNY School of Education's Master's program*, intending to become a teacher. Near the end of that degree program I had to take a speech test to qualify for a course in practice teaching—and I failed. I was told it would take two years to overcome my Italian accent, a Jewish inflection, and a lisp. I didn't want to waste two years trying to speak well enough to teach in the New York City school system. I talked to my friend Stanley Lipkin who told me that the only way to graduate was to change to psychology as he had done, and so I did. I graduated with an M.A. in psychology, again with a C minus average—and again at the bottom of my class. All 26 of our graduating group in psychology took the New York State examination for *Psychologist*, and I came out first in the test of my group. I was then employed at [New York State's] Auburn prison. That's how I became a psychologist.

Later in my career, I flunked out of Ph.D. programs at Syracuse University and Berkeley [University of California]. (I later served on the faculty at Berkeley at the time of the so-called *student riots*.) This history of doing very well on tests and poorly in grades has dominated my thinking about schools as I hope to make evident later on. In school I rarely missed a class, listened carefully, did homework, tried my best on written tests, and got poor grades. If anyone reading this can explain that to me, I'll take it as a favor.

**You began your career as a prison psychologist and later branched into industrial-organizational psychology, psychotherapy, and educational psychology. How did your prison work inform the other psychological specializations into which you migrated at later stages of your career?**

Someone decided that Auburn Prison needed a psychologist. No one informed anyone at that prison that this was so. When I got there in 1942 I found my only duty was to give inmates IQ exams, but since Auburn was a transfer prison every inmate already had an "assigned" IQ. In other words I had nothing to do but receive a paycheck. After several weeks I was assigned an inmate-clerk to help me, and so we both had nothing to do. Meantime I combed the local public library for psychology books and read what I could find. After some while I found that I could borrow books and bound volumes of journals from a state library in Albany and consequently kept learning more about various fields of psychology. But being a person who liked to keep busy, I one day asked the associate warden whether there was something I could do. His answer was brief: "Keep the fuck away from me."

The prison ran a school that went up to high school level. I made an enemy for life of the principal by telling a student who had failed the Regents exams several times that with an IQ about 80 and with fifth grade abilities he would probably never get a high school education. This information got passed on to the principal of the school who had told the inmate that he would get a diploma. After that all communications between the school and me were broken. I was told that I had no tact.

Let me back up here. While doing my 7-year Master's program at CCNY I was employed in the Works Projects Administration (WPA) as a vocational counselor in a "Negro" organization: *The Urban League*. I was the only White person in an organization of about 20 people. There, I learned vocational counseling by reading about what I regard as a strange specialty, and so I began the process of interviewing people, giving tests, and then suggesting ways of getting appropriate training. So, at Auburn I began to do vocational counseling of inmates, and soon I had people voluntarily coming to me. I ordinarily spent a whole morning interviewing an inmate, and giving individual and group tests. On the following day I'd give more interviews and tests; on the third day I'd write out a detailed plan for the inmates and keep a copy for myself. Some time after I had completed 50 such interviews, I called in all the inmates, one at a time, and found that not one of them had

taken any of my advice. I wrote an article on this experience (1945), sent it to Carl Rogers to read, and he wrote a footnote for my article. I never again did vocational counseling.

I learned that the parole board at Auburn, which I arranged to attend, met once a month. It was interesting to see how they operated. The three members of the Board took turns, one at a time, asking inmates questions, while the other two were busy examining a set of papers of their clients that were to follow. When the inmate who had been interviewed left, the questioner pronounced his decision—either “Parole” or “No parole.” The other two always agreed. I talked to the resident Parole Board member connected with the prison, and he agreed that a report by me would be useful. So I began to interview inmates for pre-parole reports and soon this became my major responsibility.

Following this stint in Auburn my work in prison psychology continued in Elmira, New York, San Quentin, California, where I became chief psychologist, and in the prison system of Wisconsin. Because of the extensive readings I had done (including reading every word in every issue of *Psychological Abstracts* for about ten years) and the close interviewing of several thousand inmates in Auburn, Elmira, San Quentin, and elsewhere, I gained a deeper knowledge of people and, I thought, the workings of the human mind. When I was through with the prison stage of my career, I felt confident that I could handle any assignment whether in industrial-organization work or in counseling and psychotherapy, though I understood there would always be large uncharted domains of human behavior and experience to be explored.

**You spent years as Chief Psychologist at San Quentin. What was the most difficult clinical decision you ever reached in your work at that prison?**

Only one problem caused me difficulty and it bothers me to this day. I suppose it might be called a clinical decision. As chief psychologist I was part of the clinical team that decided whether inmates were sane and, if so, could be executed. At one time the clinical staff consisted of three psychiatrists and myself. The chief was a capable person. His second in command was an alcoholic but had his head on straight. The third was so befuddled that almost every morning I had to explain to him the difference between psychosis and psychopathy. (This doctor had been a psychiatrist in the army, but had had an accident that damaged his brain.) I was usually the first one to see condemned prisoners, and for my examination I used my habitual clinical skills as well as, at the time, the Rorschach. My reports were listened to carefully. I soon realized of course that every one I had judged to be mentally normal was eventually executed.

When it was time to see these people, I spent the previous day reviewing all the papers that were available. I then spent the next day seeing the condemned man and writing up the case—right there in what was known as death row. On the Thursday nights preceding the Friday on which they were to be executed I could not sleep well, realizing that I was part of the process that led to their death. One case

especially troubles me to this day.

Two young Black men had come in and were awaiting their day of execution. I read the account of their crime, and the more I read, the more it seemed clear to me that an injustice had taken place. Their story: Both lived in the same neighborhood in Los Angeles, and both were on the same corner looking for a cab when one pulled up to the curb. They agreed to take it together to save on fare. The cabdriver was later found dead, shot and robbed. The two men were found the next day and each blamed the other for doing the killing. The hand of one of them bore marks of gunpowder. He had a police record while the other had none. I went to see them and saw the first one whom I'll call Jeff<sup>1</sup> because he was the shorter of the two and somewhat overweight. He impressed me as a fine fellow and he had, according to what I had read, a good work record and a good family. When questioned he told a story that rang true. Once in the cab, the other passenger had shown him a gun and said that he intended to rob the cab driver. He pleaded with the other man, but when they arrived, the other man killed the driver and offered Jeff some money that he refused to take. My entire clinical review revealed that he was sane, so I reported him normal.

Several days later I interviewed Mutt, Jeff's cab partner the night of the crime. He was tall and thin and he told the same story as Jeff but claimed Jeff had shot the cab driver. I went beyond my professional limits and asked him how come he had powder marks on his hands and he said that he had shaken hands with Jeff. I wrote my report on Mutt: He was also sane. But the case bothered me. Though I could not feel sure, I felt strongly that Jeff was innocent and went back to talk to Mutt. I said to him something as follows: “I have looked over your case and that of Jeff and I am sure that he is innocent. If you will tell me the truth, you can save an innocent man.” His brief reply: “Jeff shot him.”

Weeks went by and whenever I would go to the condemned men's cells (I usually talked to all those that I had tested, including Mutt and Jeff) Mutt refused to discuss his case. We just looked at each other. He was obdurate. Jeff was depressed but friendly.

Several days before the execution I happened to be on the same ferry with Doug Rigg, who was the associate warden in charge of Care and Treatment. He pointed out two Black women and mentioned that they were the mother and sister of Jeff. I debated whether I should talk to them and decided it was not appropriate for me to do so. Then the next day I made arrangements to witness their execution. I stood behind Jeff who with Mutt was strapped in a chair. Jeff turned around to see who was looking at them among the people gathered at the window that separated the quick from the soon-to-be-dead. When he saw me he suddenly

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<sup>1</sup> Bud Fisher is the creator of the popular comic strip, Mutt and Jeff, which had a wide readership in North America for the first half of the 20th century. Mutt's and Jeff's distinctive body types—Jeff short and portly, Mutt tall and lanky—gave rise to a common designation for pairs of males with similar disparate body builds (Eds.).

smiled, as though he knew that I knew. Mutt meanwhile was facing upwards either singing or praying. And then suddenly both turned to face forward and I silently prayed (something I had not done for years).

I am still bothered by the whole event and have wondered what I could have and should have done.

**Beyond that case, did you have any difficulties with inmates in your prison career that particularly challenged you?**

The only time I was ever threatened by an inmate was when I was sent by a psychiatrist to interview a woman at the women's prison in Wisconsin. She had been convicted of abusing two girls who were her stepdaughters and also her nieces as she had married her deceased sister's husband, an elderly man. The psychiatrist asked me to interview her because she had persistently refused to admit her guilt even though the evidence against her was strong. The parole board usually refused to release anyone who complained of being innocent.

I went to see her, and during our conversation she repeated what she had told the parole board. At one point I wondered aloud whether her elderly husband had been impotent. She denied this. Then later I administered the Rorschach test, as was my custom at the time, and after I finished I told her that the test gave evidence that her husband was impotent. This chubby, blue eyed blonde exploded in anger, but I backed out of range. This did not convince me of her innocence. I eventually wrote my report and left soon after. I have no idea what happened to her.

My experience with prison inmates has led me to this conclusion: Somewhat like O'Henry's story of *Soapy*, the man who voluntarily went to jail during the winters, many prison inmates are the same kind of people who in the Middle Ages joined armies or monasteries—places of refuge for "inadequates," where one could be sure of a place to sleep and to get fed. These are individuals who are, or who believe that they are, incompetent. Ask 1000 inmates and not one will agree with that statement. Whatever their opinions, doing stupid crimes such as taking drugs or stealing small items that led to their getting arrested and convicted are a reaction, I believe, to their unconscious desires to be taken care of. And so most convicts enter prison willingly, adjust quickly, and then try their best to get privileges. After they get out they plot to come back in again. Some inmates say of other inmates, "They've found a home." This does not apply to everyone, for example, to murderers, pedophiles, or those who commit high-finance crimes.

**During your years working in prison settings, as well as since, you've made extensive use of psychodrama—and you frequently mention your association with J. L. Moreno. Describe your relationship with him and what you've drawn from his approach for your own work.**

I developed psychodrama on my own and have never read anything by Moreno on this subject that helped me. I did try to read his *Who Shall Survive?* (Moreno, 1934/1953) when

I was studying for my Master's and found it unreadable. Some years later when working at Elmira Reformatory, a psychiatrist, Dr. Ralph Brancale, mentioned that Moreno was a good example of a paranoid personality. I only got to know him personally later on in my career. When I desired to start a therapy group at San Quentin another psychologist, Rudolf Lassner, told me of having seen Moreno direct a psychodrama session and gave me enough information about the procedures to allow me to begin to experiment on my own. Soon I began writing for Moreno's journal, and to my surprise he accepted everything I wrote. In every case, however, he added some remark about himself in the first paragraph of my article.

I finally met Moreno and Carl Rogers in Chicago on the same day. Both had known of me—Rogers who had instructed me in doing nondirective psychotherapy and Moreno who had published several of my articles. The meeting with Moreno was notable. He had been lecturing, and I listened to him. When he finished he came on the floor to greet people. He was surrounded by members of the audience and I joined the group. Finally when he came to me, I told him my name and after a surprised look he enveloped me in his arms and lifted me on his enormous belly, meanwhile shouting to all: "Corsini is here."

I got to know him fairly well because he came to Chicago often. He would frequently come to my home and lie down on a bed before preparing to demonstrate psychodrama. I always acted as his assistant. Once I brought him to the University of Chicago and announced his presence, and soon he was surrounded by dozens of interested students. At a meeting he offered me the editorship of his journal and I accepted. But I added that I would not allow him to add to the articles as he had done to me in the past. He seemed satisfied at the moment, but later that day he told me he had chosen a different editor for the journal.

Years later, accompanied by a number of people from Chicago, I went to Moreno's institute in Beacon, New York. We arrived on Friday night, and on Saturday morning we went to a room that was dominated by the "Wedding Cake," a set of three large circular wooden forms on which psychodrama could be conducted. We waited for about an hour—and no Moreno. Finally a messenger came and said that Moreno did not feel able to run the meeting. He announced that Dr. Corsini should take over. This started what I'd call a riot. Yells all over the place. Attacks on Moreno and me. Shouts and howls by disappointed attendees. I was asked by some to take over, but I refused. Finally, a rabbi managed to take charge and made an impassioned plea for order. He was told to "shut the fuck up," but someone then defended this man. The next thing we heard was someone shouting that the rabbi was screwing one of the women in the group, and the situation deteriorated.

Finally, someone got up and stated that we could fight all we wanted but maybe Corsini should be allowed to speak. I again refused to go on but was literally dragged to the Wedding Cake and held down by some of my friends. When they let me go I began to explain a role-playing technique I had often used. Pandemonium broke out again, so I went

back to my seat. Then the small group of my colleagues brought me back to the Cake and held on to me. Finally one person acting in my behalf said something to the effect that I was “innocent” and that all should listen to me. Again there were some catcalls, but finally some degree of order was established. My “captors” left me and I started to explain the *Behind-the-Back Technique*, (an effective procedure that I had developed) and then suggested that the loudmouth who had led most of the disturbance and who had disparaged the rabbi should come forward. He declined, and after more pyrotechnics the hall emptied.

Moreno finally arrived, and that evening he ran an interesting session with a woman who had been coming to the group for years. She recounted her experiences with a blind pianist who, she said, had had sexual relations with her under a piano. The pianist, in attendance, later denied it. Then she and a male assistant went through the “sexual act” right in front of us. I assumed that she was a weird person who enjoyed the role-playing and who was serving Moreno’s instructional purposes.

I was elected the president of the *American Society of Psychodrama and Group Therapy* in 1956, and I realized that it was Moreno who had engineered this. I arranged that the next election would be fair and appointed a trustworthy person to receive the ballot envelopes. He did this only after the votes had been received and opened by Moreno. I accused Moreno of double-dealing and quit his organization. He protested that all organizations were so manipulated. The last time I saw him was in the lobby of a hotel. After we caught sight of each other, I grabbed my wife’s hand, (we had attended the conference together) and sped away. Moreno started running after us, but we evaded him. I never saw him after that.

My final comment: Moreno was insane and had streaks of genius. No one who had any integrity stuck with him.

**You are known to be an Adlerian though you characterize yourself as an eclectic. Though you’ve evolved beyond the classical Adlerian system over the decades, what basic Adlerian principles still inform your work and philosophy?**

Throughout my life I looked for a system to help me understand what motivated people. I always found the theory and philosophy of Adler most satisfactory for that purpose. Adlerian psychology is not as parochial or culture-bound as Jung’s or Freud’s. In my *Handbook of Innovative Therapies* I chose to include several different systems of therapy written by Adlerians. So I haven’t had to be sold on Adlerianism; I’ve long believed what Adler was all about. As I’ve often said to my friends and colleagues, my personal, secular religion has long been founded on his principle of *gemeinschaftsgefühl* [German for “community spirit or interest”]. I have never deviated from Adlerian principles because they always appeared to be consistent with common sense. All of my writings are consistent with those principles.

Dr. Dreikurs, in whose institute I worked, showed me the possibilities that Adlerian thinking and actions opened for

the therapist. Dreikurs and I broke our connections in 1972, due in some measure to professional jealousy, but principally because we had very different views of education—his theory and methodology dealt with making teachers’ work easier by improving their understanding of children, while my intention was to change the school system completely. He aimed for one desirable goal and I aimed for a set of different goals. But his system and mine are both one hundred per cent Adlerian.

**Which psychologists with whom you worked and studied were most influential in shaping the system of psychotherapy you evolved and used over the past 60 years?**

I can’t point to any psychologist with whom I’ve worked or studied who, beyond Rudolph Dreikurs, has influenced me significantly. Floyd Allport and Carl Rogers were the most renowned teachers I had, but both were a great disappointment to me—Allport because at that time he seemed only interested in his research and spent no time, as I can remember, *teaching* about personality or social relations. I will speak of my relationship with Rogers later on.

I met and had various short professional relationships with some prominent American psychologists (many became APA presidents); they include George Albee, Anne Anastasi, Albert Bandura, Carl Rogers, Donald Campbell, Florence Denmark, Robert Perloff, J. P. Guilford, Joseph Matarazzo, O. H. Mowrer, B. F. Skinner, and Philip Zimbardo. But none of them worked closely with me. Ted Blau, an ex-president of the APA, was one of my trainees when at the Elmira Reformatory. However, Dr. Rudolph Dreikurs greatly influenced and in a sense rescued me from both Carl Rogers and J. L. Moreno (the three were trying in their own way to enlist me as an acolyte). On the other hand, I have remained loyal to both Rogers and Moreno in that I have continued to use their methods. But I became an Adlerian because Adlerian psychology is nonrestrictive. It is more a philosophy than a system of psychology.

I found that I was an Adlerian even before I became familiar with Adler’s writings. While working at San Quentin, (before undertaking doctoral studies in 1953 at the University of Chicago), I had successfully treated a child with a certain behavior problem—dawdling at the dinner table. I later found to my delight that Dreikurs’ procedures for such a problem were identical to mine. Dreikurs accepted me as his associate in doing family counseling at the Adler Institute of Chicago—and this amounted to sitting with him while he did his magic. And only when he was stuck would he ask me to make some input. He had a number of different people assist him every year, but he asked me to counsel with him for two years. Every Saturday during the years of my doctoral program I would pick him up and drive him and his wife to the counseling center. What happened over time between us was that he distanced himself from me for an unusual reason. Dreikurs did a lot of publishing, but he never succeeded in getting an article accepted by the *American Psychiatric Journal*. His first breakthrough came when I wrote an article, gave him first authorship, and it was accepted. Then I wrote a book (Dreikurs, Gould, & Corsini,

1974) and offered it to him. He expressed gratitude each time I asked him to coauthor a manuscript, but then he declined and seemed to shy away from me. Finally the big breakup came in 1972 when I developed *Individual Education*, which overshadowed his attempt to do the same thing. I believe the basic reason was that it appeared to him that I was competing with him, whereas in fact I was only following in his footsteps. His wife had taken a dislike to me, and at a meeting at which the members of the Institute were present compared me to a younger son who was competing with him. I admit that I learned more from Dr. Rudolph Dreikurs than from anyone else I've ever worked with, but instead of making a friend, I made an enemy.

**Carl Rogers was your mentor in the University of Chicago doctoral program you pursued in the early '50s. How important was he to your personal and professional formation?**

I'll try to explain my relationship with him. While at Auburn Prison I read his book (Rogers, 1942) on counseling and psychotherapy, at about the same time that I gave up doing vocational counseling. I began to use his system, failed, got in touch with him, and told him the details of one client I was seeing. Surprisingly, he told me that he would modify his system in the light of my experience: He told me that I should apprise clients of the nature of his system and what my role would be. I never had trouble with inmates after that. Some seven years later at the age of 39 I decided to come to the University of Chicago because he was there and because I hoped that my former contact with him and the possibility of therapy with him might lead to my getting the PhD that had eluded me twice, (once at Syracuse and once at Berkeley).

During the course of my doctoral program, I went to his office to ask for therapy, but he said he couldn't see me at the time because he had a full schedule. He suggested however that I enter therapy in a group headed by another of his students. I had a wonderful, liberating experience in that group. I never did let Rogers know that it had transformed me. The reason was simple. I was frightened to do anything that might jeopardize my status in the doctoral program. I didn't know how he might react if he knew that I had had a successful therapy by a student. So, the sessions I had with Carl were not productive. He conducted therapy with me as he continued to write. On one occasion I criticized him, telling him that he reminded me of a statue of Abraham Lincoln I had seen at Disneyland that recited the Gettysburg Address. His words to me seemed artificial and insincere. He calmly repeated my statement and then he said that he valued me—but I didn't believe him. After our therapeutic relationship ended, I bought him the most expensive artist's brush I could find as a present as I knew he was an amateur painter.

I took one course from him and the experience was far different from any other courses I took. Rogers let the students alone and they reacted in a most unusual way. I could not tell what was real in the class process and what was acting "as if." At times the same small group in which I found myself talked to one another in a way that made no sense. And Rogers didn't take any active role that I remember. I thought of asking him, but again I faltered for

the same reason as mentioned above, I didn't want to jeopardize my status in the program. I didn't trust him, and I never was close to him in any way. Again I must say Rogers influenced me more by his writing than through our personal relations.

I doubt that Carl Rogers had close friends. Later in life, I understand that he had some kind of mental breakdown. That made me recall the one experience in which I saw him role-playing a person who was completely different from his usual, public self. He had done it so well that I wondered whether his whole life was a kind of a role-play. At one point in a psychodrama I did with him, he was cast as a son-of-a-bitch of a professor instead of with the persona he normally displayed. I was so shocked when he played that role so well that I suspected that this probably was his real alternate personality.

Over the years Rogers and I met but infrequently. Shortly before his death I recommended to a physician who lived near him to get training from him. I can mention in passing that I'd advise all therapists to begin as Rogerians as they are not likely to do anyone harm, regardless of how unskilled they may be using his procedures. Soon after making that referral I was asked to write two articles about Rogers, and I asked him whether I should write them. I told him that some things I might write could upset him. He told me to go ahead, and I did. I was about to send the information to him (that I had had good therapy by his student but not by him) when I got a phone call from the physician I had referred to Rogers, telling me he had died.

One further memory comes to mind. The psychology faculty at Chicago scheduled a softball game against the students. The faculty was on one side when two people acting as captains began picking players, and I was surprised to see how Carl Rogers reacted when the captain kept picking others before him: He seemed hurt and frightened.

**You had an encounter with Bruno Bettelheim early on in your career relative to a book on psychotherapy that you were editing. What were the issues and the conclusions you came to?**

I was interested in doing the first of my series of *Critical Incidents* books (Standal & Corsini, 1959), one on psychotherapy, and I wanted a Freudian commentator. Before that I had been invited to be a lecturer at the Menninger Clinic, but when I asked Karl Menninger to be a consultant to the book, he declined to participate. Later in Chicago I decided to ask Bruno Bettelheim to be the Freudian consultant to this book. I called him and made an appointment to see him about eight o'clock in the evening in his office. Of course, I knew about Bettelheim, because all reports about him were that he was highly emotional and abusive to students. When I entered, he greeted me warmly and I told him of the project and mentioned the names of various people who had already agreed to be participants. Rudolph Dreikurs, Albert Ellis, Jerome Frank, Victor Frankl, Ernest Hilgard, Ashley Montagu, Jacob Moreno, and Carl Rogers had agreed to be contributors, but I still needed a Freudian. When he heard what the book was about and who the other authors were, he suddenly changed his attitude.

"Who are you to do such a book?" It was evident he was angry. I answered as best I could.

"Who are these people who *dare* to participate?" I tried to explain that all of them were competent and highly respected, but he dismissed all of them as incompetent. We then got into an argument about treatment. Bettelheim took the point of view that medical doctors who were also psychoanalysts were the only ones who could give psychological treatments. At one point I told him that several of the people that I had already recruited as consultants were psychodynamically oriented. His reply: "So is my butcher." I remember, in the flurry of words, arguing about treatment, and I said that if one person gave another an aspirin or stanching a flow of blood, that this was treatment. He denied this and held firmly to his position. We both got more emotional and aggressive. Finally as I got up to go, he seized me by my jacket. At that point I said: "Let go of me," and I balled my right fist. If he had not let go, he would have had a bloody face. I walked out. Later, Karl Menninger and David Shakow also refused to participate. I never did get a psychoanalyst to contribute.

Incidentally, when the book came out, Starke Hathaway reviewed it and made outrageous remarks about it; he also directed some *ad hominem* remarks at me. I complained to Edwin Boring who was the editor of *Contemporary Psychology* and pointed out that Hathaway was an enemy of psychologists as therapists. (Paul Meehl, the series editor of the book, had conveyed this to me.). Boring sent me a long letter of apology. Later on, as I planned to move to Hawaii, this review by Hathaway was read by the head of the psychology department of the University of Hawaii. He told me I would never be hired by the psychology department there. I thus came to Hawaii under a cloud. Ironically, I was the first to get the *Hawaii Psychological Association Prize* for my contributions to psychology, and the first to be interviewed on videotape—tapes archived for the use of future generations—by this association. I am now on the affiliate graduate faculty of the University of Hawaii and have taught at that school in several departments including education, business, and psychology.

**We understand that you were invited to the psychoanalytically oriented Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, though you were known to be an Adlerian. Would you explain that to us?**

After I had written my first book, *Methods of Group Psychotherapy* (Corsini, 1957), I received to my surprise a letter from an MD in Kansas, asking me if I would be a guest of the Menninger Clinic for a week—from a Monday to a Friday. I would be allowed to observe their operations and would be a lecturer on group therapy, which they were conducting there. I accepted and waited for the time to come. I had read two of Karl Menninger's books, and one of them the *Human Mind* (Menninger, 1945) had been a favorite of mine. I found out that Carl Rogers had been invited some time earlier, and I went to see him. It turned out that the experience had been painful and humiliating to him. He told me that Karl Menninger and the rest of the

psychotherapists there attacked him, and that he never defended himself. He presented the persona that he was known for: a gentle soul. I got the impression that he, in effect, was advising me not to accept the invitation.

I went to the Menninger Clinic anyway, and a young physician was appointed to be my constant guide. My first interview was with Karl Menninger. As soon as it was appropriate I told him that I was editing *Critical Incidents in Psychotherapy*. I asked him if he would serve as a psychoanalytic consultant for the book. He replied that the psychology department of the University of Kansas had refused to accept him (or any psychoanalysts) on their faculty. He said his colleagues in psychoanalysis would not be pleased if he participated in a book edited by a psychologist. Remembering what Carl Rogers had said to me, I told Dr. Menninger I was ashamed that I had come to his clinic to be considered there as an inferior. I added that I had had a great deal of respect for him up to now. He didn't reply, and then said: "We have to go, and I am supposed to bring you to Winter VA Hospital."

We got into a sports car and he scared me with his driving. I felt sure that we would crash because he drove so fast and made dangerous turns. I realized that I had angered him. Several days later I was in a group of young physicians who were in training to be psychoanalysts, and Menninger started to discuss Kinsey's (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) second book. As he went on he criticized this book and made the point that Kinsey, as a biologist, was out of his league. He also began to attack others who were not physicians who dared to write on the topic of sexuality. Finally, he got to a point where he mentioned a famous German specialist, a physician whose name he could not remember. He asked the audience if anyone knew it—and the only hand that went up was mine. Glaring at me he nodded, and I mentioned the name, Magnus Hirschfeld. He nodded again and went on.

There was a final event scheduled with Karl Menninger. On Thursday afternoons all other activities stopped and the monthly speaker was scheduled to talk to the entire group. I stepped up on a small platform with a microphone in front of me and saw about 200 people in front of me. As Carl Rogers had told me, seated on the side of the room *facing the audience* was Menninger. My selected topic was the history of group psychotherapy. I was 5 minutes into my talk when I was stopped by a question from Karl Menninger. I stopped my talk, turned towards him and said in a calm and clear voice: "First, I want to tell you that I will take questions at the end of my talk, and second, if you had been listening, you would know that I already answered that question." Every one froze. Absolute silence. Then I continued my talk. I don't remember if there were any questions. The next day while walking about, I looked into various rooms of the clinic. In some cases individuals pulled me in and shook my hand. Some even kissed me.

**You must have had many contacts with other notables in the field of psychology. Do you have any memories of them you could share with us?**

Let me say a few words about O. H. Mowrer. I don't remember the circumstances of why we met. It was at the time I was an industrial psychologist. He was a former president of the American Psychological Association and I was pleased to meet him. I recall that we met in a restaurant. No sooner had we sat down than I was surprised to find myself in a therapy session—with him the patient and me the therapist. At that time I knew nothing of his mental illness and I played the role of Carl Rogers, doing much listening and nodding. He seemed quite content. Either that evening or soon after I attended a meeting at which he was to speak, and he impressed me as a lecturer. I recall that he outlined his talk on a chalk board, and I found it exceptionally clear and informative.

Victor Frankl also comes to mind. I attended a meeting, I believe, of group therapists. I noted that the man seated to my left did not have a tag identifying himself. During the meeting he kept writing and I imagined that he was taking notes. When the speaker stopped, this unknown person handed me the sheet he had been writing on, and I saw a drawing of a woman on a couch and a man sitting in the manner of Freud. Neatly printed below in block letters were the words: DR. CORSINI, WOULD YOU MIND KISSING ME? Surprised, I asked "Who are you?" and he replied "Victor Frankl." I asked how he had known of me and how he had located me, and he told me that I had introduced him to America in the book *Critical Incidents In Psychotherapy*. He had noted that I was on the panel and he had found me by looking for my identification tab.

A word about Fritz Perls. I was president of the *American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama*, and we had a convention in California. As I recall, Moreno was not present, but Fritz Perls was. Part of the program was devoted to group meetings headed by some well reputed practitioners. Perls was in one group and all members were lying down on the floor. While Perls was lecturing, some were on their backs, some were lying sideways, and others like Perls, himself, were flat on their bellies, heads resting on their arms. I listened for a while and then moved on to other groups.

Later on I took over and told the group that I wished to do a psychodrama and asked for someone with a problem. I was standing on a platform with members on all four sides and a young man volunteered to tell us his problems and he came up and it turned out he was a psychiatrist. His problem had to do with his wife who objected to his spending his time trying to create a University of Peace rather than bringing money home as a therapist. At one point after he finished telling this tale, I asked him to pick a wife from the group as well as his parents. Sure enough his father was played by Perls. Incidentally, I found out that Perls later gave me credit for teaching him the use of a chair to represent a person. However, I had learned that procedure from someone else, Rosemary Lippitt (see Corsini, 1958).

**One of your most creative and influential projects was the development with Bina Rosenberg of the notion of *Common Factors* in psychotherapy, which subsequently pervaded**

### **the clinical literature. How do you view that work today?**

I'll start from the beginning. I invented a method that I called *Clinical Factor Analysis* defined in my dictionary as: "A nonmathematical method for generating independent factors. Involves putting either words or phrases on cards and then seeking other cards that are logically associated; when finished, picking up another card and continuing with a new concept." We searched the literature analysing the causes of success in group therapy and found that the first factor was altruism. I never saw my name associated in the literature with the concept. I devised this method, but in my dictionary I did not want to have myself as the author of too many items, and so I credited Dr. Bina Rosenberg, although she was a physician and totally ignorant of research methodologies.

The background of the concept was the following: I had tried to read the complete literature on group psychotherapy and as a matter of fact, with a librarian (L. Putzey), we generated a complete set of references in the *Group Psychotherapy Monographs* in 1957. In the process of reading these items for my first book *Methods of Group Psychotherapy* (1957). I ran into an unusual problem. Two collaborators had written a number of articles for this book, and then later each had written separate articles on the same issue. Each had listed five basic reasons to explain the success of group therapy. I read first one set and then the second, expecting to find that they would have the same five factors. Only one factor was common to both lists. I then began to collect terms that various group therapists used for those variables to which they attributed improvement. I paid no attention to duplicates and eventually had exactly 166 different statements of "mechanisms" accounting for therapeutic success. Each of these items was written on the back of business cards and spread out on a table. The number was so great that they made no sense. The first one I picked up might have read "Care shown by others." I said to Bina Rosenberg: "Let's see if concern or consideration by others in the group is mentioned." And we found perhaps a dozen and we then gave them the name of *Altruism*. So now we had 154 items to analyze. This took several hours and eventually we isolated nine common factors, which we grouped into three superfactors:

**EMOTIONAL** factors (*Acceptance, Altruism, Transference*),

**INTELLECTUAL** factors (*Spectator therapy. Universalization, Intellectualization*) and

**ACTION** factors (*Reality testing, Ventilation, Interaction*)

To my knowledge no one has ever cited me for this investigation into the common factors underlying most psychotherapy, and I've been surprised to learn that this procedure seems to have been used by others under another name.

**We'd like to ask you a few personal questions bearing on your family of origin. We know you have authored an unpublished book called *Mama Mia*. What was your mother's influence**

### on the development of your personality?

My immediate answer would be *none and everything*. I believe I was a great disappointment to my mother up to age 14. We were constantly in conflict and she whipped me frequently with a line rope. But I believe we loved each other tremendously. I don't remember her ever beating my younger brother, Harold, who was five years my junior. My father, who died when I was six, punched me occasionally in the face and knocked me unconscious a number of times. He had an explosive temper, and my mother would find me unconscious with my father looking on at what he had done. Whatever the reason, somehow I triggered his assaultive tendencies. About the only statement she made to me about my father was that he had told her that when he spoke to me I replied as though I were an adult.

I never was delinquent. But somehow I had the power of driving my mother to distraction. When beating me was not the answer, she would bite her wrist to show me her anger. Once in a while she would lie on the floor in the attitude of Christ on the Cross to express her wish to be dead or to show me that my behavior was torture to her. Twice she brought me to the parish church to tell the priests there that she could not handle me and to ask them whether I could be placed somewhere else. This frightened me, and then I would swear to behave. Now, what were my faults?

My mother only told me what she saw to be my faults when I was about fifty. I asked her, and her answer surprised me. She said that she did not want me to become like Johnny D—, a boy I hardly remembered. She told me that he had been arrested and sent away to a "facility" and she worried that because of my behavior I would similarly bring shame on my family. On reflection, as I never ran with a gang of young thieves and never stole or broke any laws, I can't explain her suspicions and mistreatment of me. In the last analysis, I think it was that she blamed me for the death of my father. This is a separate aspect of my life that I discuss in a book I coedited with Frank Dumont (Dumont & Corsini, 2000).

I was completely different from my mother. Let me give some examples. I believe I was about five when she told me that she had broken a mirror after which her father died. She implied that breaking the mirror caused her father's death. I thought that perhaps an invisible arrow had gone from Vermont (where we lived that year) to Italy. After that I never took anything she told me seriously. I recall that I was a skeptic even as a child. An early example of my research bent: About this time a neighbor asked for a glass of water and told me to run the water first as that would make it colder. After several experiments I realized that this was so, though I didn't realize why. But I want to tell the story of the *Miracle of the Quarter* because of its psychological implications.

One evening when I was about ten my mother tried to light the gas stove we had with the last match in a match box, and the gas did not go on. She realized that the meter that was out of sight in the bottom of a closet in the kitchen had run out. It took quarters to provide more gas, like putting coins in a parking meter. She searched her purse and no quarters. Then she gave me a dollar to go to a store to get

change. As I was about to go out, she opened a new box of matches. On top of the matches was a quarter!

She lifted her head to the ceiling and began to thank Jesus for the miracle that he wrought and asked me to join in. I refused. She insisted that it was a miracle and that Jesus who was her prime protector had caused the coin to appear. We got into an argument that lasted several days. Finally one evening, several days later, after we had eaten and again restarted the same argument, she announced we should go to the local church to see a priest. We approached the church, and she knocked on the door. A woman opened it, and my mother explained we had come to see a priest. We went to a weakly lit room, furnished with a *prie-dieu* with an image of Jesus above it. After a few minutes a young priest came in, made the sign of the cross, which we imitated, and then he asked why we had come. My mother told him what had happened and used the term, *miraculo* several times. After she finished he turned to me and asked me what I thought. I said something as follows: "Father, for a miracle to occur, the Catholic church has twelve conditions for it to be accepted as a miracle. First, the purpose of a miracle is to prove to people that God exists and for all people to believe in him, and since I and my mother are the only witnesses to the so-called miracle and since I don't believe it is a miracle, it has only convinced her and not me. The second condition is that the occurrence cannot have occurred in any other normal way. I think there are several other ways it could have occurred . . ." and then I went down the list to the last item that in order for a miracle to be so regarded, the pope had to approve it after a collection of cardinals had approved it. When I had finished, the priest again made the sign of the cross and said: "Your son is right. It is not a miracle."

My mother strode out of the church and rapidly headed home, which meant that she did not want me near her. After a while she stopped, looked at me, and said "If we had gone to an Italian priest he would have agreed with me." She continued a ways and again stopped and said: "I think you know more than that priest knows."

So, trying to be as honest as I can be, I must say she may have had an influence on me. She was a fanatic Catholic. I never really believed there was a God, and more than that I had a prejudice against Jesus because she had once told me she loved him more than me. And yet I loved her more than anyone else I've ever loved, and I felt sure that I was number One in her life. (My brother Harold may not agree with me.) Let someone else figure this out.

**You have stated that your repeated school failures were due to your father's premature death at the age of thirty-five when you were six. At the same time you gave stellar performances on aptitude and ability tests. Could you clarify this for us?**

I have already stated that on entering the University of Chicago I asked Carl Rogers whether he would see me as a client, and he could not because his personal counseling schedule was full. He suggested that I participate in a therapy group that was being run by another graduate

student. I accepted immediately. The group started with about a dozen students and by the end of the first month it had dwindled to three: the therapist, myself, and another student. As you can expect I did most of the talking. As I began to explain my fascination with the female breast I suddenly could not talk, my throat clogged, tears came to my eyes, and I held on to the arms of my chair and thought I could hear my mother saying in Italian: *I am glad your father died because otherwise he would have killed you*. Then, suddenly, instantaneously, I understood everything about myself, and the mystery of my failure to do well academically was clear to me. My explanatory set of concepts went as follows:

I was a bad boy. Everyone said so. An aunt told me that she'd find it easier to have the five children she had than me. Another aunt forced us to move into a new home because she could not stand me. I drove my mother and father wild.

My father could not stand me and knocked me unconscious at least two times.

My mother had two boys before me, and they both died in infancy. She had two more boys after me and they also died. To see her only remaining son unconscious, apparently dead, led her to decide that my father had to die. And he did die.

Consequently, I was responsible for his death and had made my mother a widow.

Further, I must suffer for my sins and for my crime. No one should like me. And I should not succeed in school.

Parricide! As was true for Cain who had killed his

brother, I could not face the world. And this moment some fifty years ago still is a vivid memory.

This event provokes many questions. Why did this method of nonintervention work? Is psychotherapy really self-therapy? Was it Rogers' procedure that did the trick? And why after this did I become an Adlerian? Smart as I think I am, I haven't been able to answer these questions.

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