

Personal Reflections on Albert Ellis & REBT

On the Contributions of Dr. Albert Ellis

Aaron T. Beck

A eulogy is a highly subjective matter. It often reflects as much of the personal narrative of the speaker as it does of the subject. As Ellis pointed out numerous times, we see the world through our own filters or lenses.

More Tributes

[Michael Bloomberg](#), Mayor of New York City (PDF)

[Jeffrey Zeig](#), Director of the Milton Erickson Foundation, Inc. (PDF)

[Frank Farley](#), President-Elect, Division of Media Psych, (Div 46), APA (PDF)

A video tribute from [Dr. Daniel Eckstein](#), former President of NASAP (North American Society for Adlerian Psychology).

That said, I will try to tell what Albert Ellis meant to me personally as well as to the world. We all know Ellis as an explorer, revolutionary, therapist, theorist, and teacher. But how did these various roles play out in his actual interactions with his colleagues and friends?

To describe my personal narrative of Al Ellis, I have to go back many decades to my beginnings in the field of therapy and research.

Like Ellis, I was trained as a psychoanalyst. Although I always had some misgivings regarding the Psychoanalytic Establishment, which was like a religious order in many ways with its authoritarianism, rites of passage, and demands for obedience to its rituals, I believed that the theory and therapy had a solid basis. Having caught the research bug early in life, I was determined to demonstrate through my research that

the theory was correct and skeptics were wrong. In actuality, my research indicated that I was wrong and the skeptics were right. In short, I came up with a new theory and therapy which I later called Cognitive Therapy. Unfortunately, there was nobody I could discuss this with, except my wife, Phyllis, and daughter, Judith. At this point, Al came into my life.

He happened to see a couple of my articles published in 1963 and 1964 and made contact with me.

This was particularly significant because at last I had found someone I could talk to. I soon discovered, of course, that he had broken ranks with traditional psychotherapy many years previously and had laid out a new cognitive theory and therapy that he called Rational Therapy and then Rational Emotive Therapy. I also found that our approaches were simpatico, and Al graciously reprinted my 2 articles in his house organ, *The Journal of Rational Living*.

I also was thrilled to learn that he had directly challenged the psychotherapy establishment, had established a clinic and a school, and was a prolific author. I was particularly impressed not only by his no-nonsense therapy but by his bare knuckled, no-nonsense lectures.

Subsequent to this, Al organized a symposium bringing together the very few like-minded therapists. These were primarily behavior therapists who were disillusioned with classical learning theory and sought to blend cognitive techniques into the established behavior therapies. Around the same time, Al provided the funding for Don Meichenbaum to launch his *Cognitive Behavior Therapy Newsletter*, which was the precursor of the journal, *Cognitive Therapy and Research*.

Al and I continued our interchange over the years. One telling example of his therapeutic personality occurred when I invited him to do a Grand Rounds at the University of Pennsylvania Department of Psychiatry. He interviewed a young lady before a large audience of residents, medical students, and staff (largely psychoanalysts). He conducted the interview in his usual directive, brash manner but underneath this was tenderness and understanding. Afterwards, several of my colleagues reproached me for having invited him. Their attitude was that by ignoring the patient's unconscious, he was harming her. Later, I had occasion to talk to the patient and asked her about the interview. She remarked, "He is the first person who ever understood me."

Al's uncanny ability to tease out patients' thoughts and feelings was also obvious in the Friday night sessions at the Institute, which I attended whenever I had the opportunity.

In recent years, Frank Farley brought us together for dialogues at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. Needless to say, there was an overflow audience at these sessions. These interchanges were highly informative and entertaining. On one occasion, Frank asked me to start off the conversation with a summary of my recent work. When I was finished, Al was asked to respond to my comments. He replied, "To tell you the truth, I didn't hear a damn thing he said," — his hearing aid was turned off— but he responded anyhow!

There is much more I could tell about Al but I would like to close with a personal appreciation of what Al meant not only to me but to the world. When I was a young boy, I read about the Cedars of Lebanon, grand trees that lived for over 100 years and were objects of awe and reverence. It was believed that if these trees were cut down, it would be the end of civilization because they were irreplaceable.

Al was one of the cedars and he will not be replaced in this generation. However, he leaves a grand legacy behind him with his wonderful wife, Debbie, all his students, and the scores of grateful patients who are living better lives because of him.

David D. Burns, M.D.

I was deeply saddened to hear of the death of Dr. Ellis. At the same time, it was almost a relief, since he suffered so greatly over the past year or two. I regret being unable to join you in person for the memorial service, but will be conducting a workshop in San Antonio on September 28. I will be thinking about you and will ask the audience to take a moment of silence in his honor. I often mention his tremendous contributions and unforgettable personality and style in my teaching.

Al touched the lives of many people with his extreme generosity and support of his colleagues and students. His professional contributions were legendary. On a personal level, he was always very supportive of my efforts, even though I was never trained in REBT and have been more of a CBT practitioner throughout my career. His support was extremely meaningful to me over the years, and I admired him tremendously. I appreciated the chance to know him and to learn so much from him. If you review the key ideas that have transformed the understanding and practice of psychotherapy in the past 50 years, many of them trace their origins to the pioneering and brilliant work of Dr. Ellis. He was clearly one of the luminaries of modern psychology.

His death has been a loss to me personally, and will be an enormous loss to clinicians throughout the world who have benefited so greatly from his incredible teaching and writing, his self-sacrifice, and his unwavering dedication to his vision. Goodbye, Dr. Ellis.

David D. Burns, M.D.
Adjunct Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Stanford Medical School
