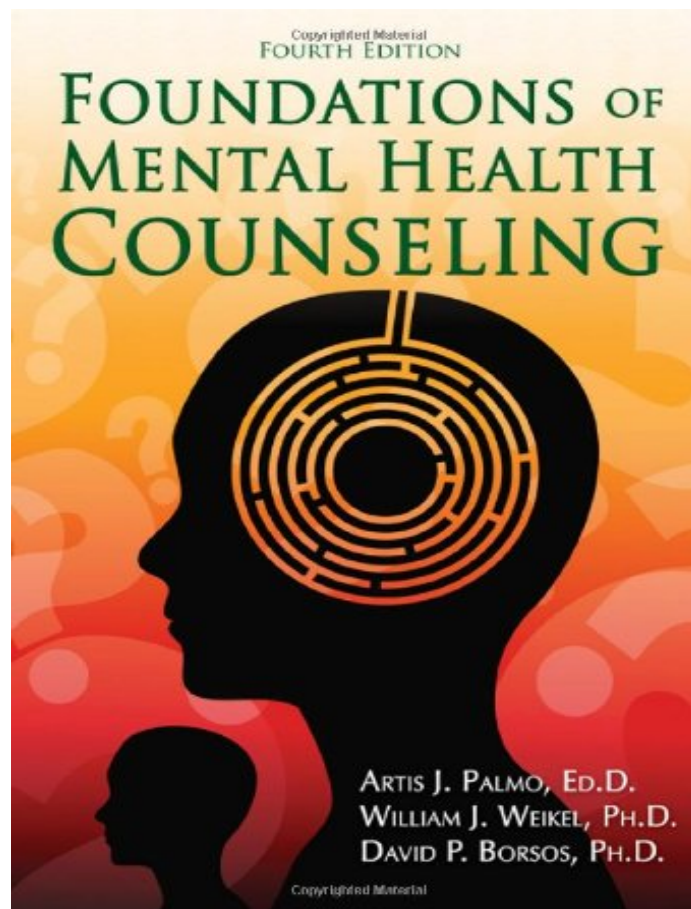


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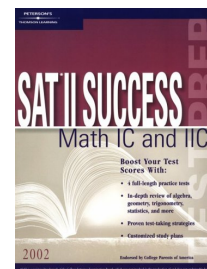
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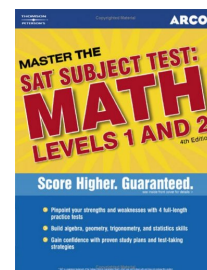
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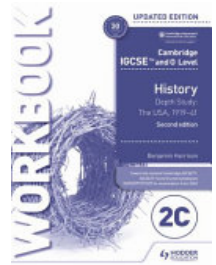
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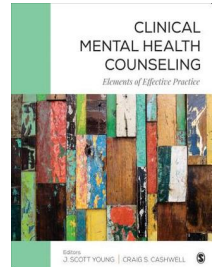
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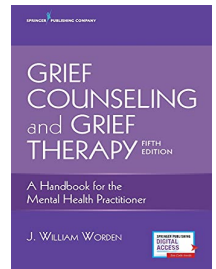
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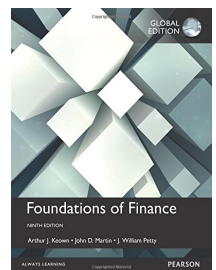
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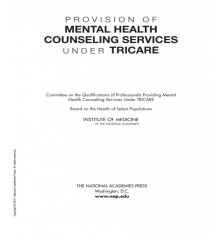
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FOUNDATIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING



ARTIS J. PALMO, ED.D.
WILLIAM J. WEIKEL, PH.D.
DAVID P. BORSOS, PH.D.

FOUNDATIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING

Fourth Edition

FOUNDATIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING

Edited by

ARTIS J. PALMO, Ed.D.

*Bethlehem Counseling Associates, P.C.
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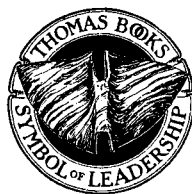
*Professor Emeritus and Private Practice
Morehead State University
Morehead, Kentucky*

DAVID P. BORSOS, Ph.D.

*Assistant Professor of Psychology
Chestnut Hill College
Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania*

With a Foreword by

Edwin L. Herr, Ed.D.



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CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Casey Barrio Minton is Associate Professor of Counseling and Counseling Program Coordinator at the University of North Texas. A National Certified Counselor and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) Trainer, she specializes in crisis intervention, has experience working with adolescents and adults across mental health counseling settings, and has served as director of the Counseling & Human Development Center, a university-based mental health counseling training center. Dr. Minton is active on research teams regarding suicide and crisis, has published multiple journal articles regarding crisis and counselor preparation, and is co-author of a book regarding counselor preparation. She is an active member of state and national counseling associations, where she serves as President-Elect of Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) International, on the Executive Council for the Association for Assessment in Counseling and Education (AACE), and as co-chair of the AACE Task Force regarding CACREP Assessment and Evaluation Guidelines. Dr. Minton is an editorial review board member for *Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation* and the *Journal of Professional Counseling*, and she serves as an ad hoc reviewer for *Counselor Education & Supervision*.

Dr. David P. Borsos is a licensed psychologist in Pennsylvania. He has treated a wide variety of clinical cases in his 25-year career. These include the “normal” outpatient mood and anxiety disorders, as well as some intense work with addictions and acting-out psychotics staying in community living arrangements. His professional interests these days revolve around integrating the various theories of counseling into a more unified field and teaching others how to do effective therapy.

To this end, Dr. Borsos teaches as an assistant professor in the Master’s Program in Clinical and Counseling Psychology at Chestnut Hill College. Here he finds great pleasure in bringing new counselors into the field through such courses as Counseling Techniques, Theories, Psychopathology, Group Counseling, Supervision and other treatment-oriented courses. He also serves as the administrative coordinator for the program. Dr. Borsos looks forward to the day when all

counselors and therapists are equally effective and efficient and when going to counseling is as accepted by the public as getting a flu shot.

Lisa A. Brenner, Ph.D. is a Board Certified Rehabilitation Psychologist, an Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Neurology, and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the University of Colorado Denver, School of Medicine, and Director of Education for the VA VISN 19 Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC). Dr. Brenner is also the Director of Training for the MIRECC Psychology Post-Doctoral Fellowship program. Her primary area of research interest is traumatic brain injury (TBI) and comorbid psychiatric disorders. Dr. Brenner serves as Member at Large on two national boards: APA Division 22 and the VA Psychology Training Council. She is a member of the Colorado Brain Injury Advisory Board and has consulted with the Colorado Department of Human Services to improve care for persons with TBI receiving treatment in the community mental health system. Dr. Brenner is also a member of the research team at Craig Hospital. She is the Principal Investigator (PI) on grants entitled *Use of a TBI Screen in a Veteran Mental Health Population: Prevalence, Validation and Psychiatric Outcomes* (Colorado Brain Injury Trust Fund, Office of Behavioral Health and Housing) and *Executive Dysfunction and Suicide in Psychiatric Outpatients and Inpatients* (VA Merit Review), and a Co-PI on *A Longitudinal Study of Deployment-Related Mild TBI: Incidence, Natural History, and Predictors of Recovery in Soldiers Returning from OIF/OEF* (Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs - Intramural TBI Investigator-Initiated Research Award) and *Health and Wellness Intervention for Individuals with TBI* (National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research). Dr. Brenner has numerous peer-reviewed publications and recently co-authored a book chapter entitled "Deployment-Acquired TBI and Suicidality: Risk and Assessment."

JoLynn Carney, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Counselor Education in the Department of Counseling Education, Counseling Psychology, and Rehabilitation Services at the Pennsylvania State University. She is a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor who has experience working in community mental health agencies, private practice, and schools. She has been a trustee on a number of boards of directors that service at-risk youth, has served on state-counseling boards, works closely with local school districts, and is a recipient of several service awards from various professional groups. Dr. Carney is the current President-Elect of Chi Sigma Iota International, is chapter faculty advisor, and has served as Regional Chapter Facilitator for the North Atlantic Region. Her research and publishing focus on intervention/prevention aspects of youth violence and adolescent suicide.

Her scholarly work also includes wellness programming and counselor-training techniques. A significant focus is on the psychophysiological influence of chronic bullying on youth. She currently serves on editorial boards of nationally recognized counseling journals, publishes, and runs local, regional, and national trainings/workshops in her areas of expertise.

Stephen Feit, Ed.D., LCPC, NCC, ACS is a Professor of Counseling and past Chair of the Counseling Department at Idaho State University. His areas of interest include Supervision, Professional Identity, and Doctoral Student Career Development. Professionally, he has been President of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, a division of the American Counseling Association (ACA). He also is a past Chair of the ACA Ethics Committee. He currently is serving as the Interim Dean of the Kasiska College of Health Professions at Idaho State University.

Marc A. Grimmatt, Ph.D. is an associate professor and coordinator for clinical mental health counseling in the counselor education program at North Carolina State University. He earned his doctorate in Counseling Psychology from the University of Georgia and is a Licensed Psychologist. Dr. Grimmatt completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of South Carolina Counseling and Human Development Center, where his training focused on culturally competent counseling, marriage and family therapy, substance abuse counseling, and sexual abuse counseling. He has more than 10 years of professional mental health experience working in different settings, including university counseling, community mental health, and substance abuse treatment centers, as well as in-home counseling services and private practice. Dr. Grimmatt's research focuses on multiculturalism, social justice, and the early career development of African American boys.

Dr. Peter Gutierrez is a clinical/research psychologist with the VA VISN 19's Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center and Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Colorado Denver School of Medicine. A licensed psychologist in Colorado, he is an expert in adolescent and young adult suicide assessment, veteran suicide, and psychosocial interventions for suicidal veterans. He is the Principle Investigator on a grant-funded study investigating the impact of medication packaging changes on decreasing accidental and intentional overdoses in high-risk psychiatric patients. He is jointly directing a pending grant-funded military suicide research consortium. Dr. Gutierrez served on the U.S. Army Suicide Reduction and Prevention Research Strategic Planning

Workgroup, as the Soldier Identification and Case Management Expert Lead. He is a past President of the American Association of Suicidology and recipient of their Shneidman Award for outstanding research contributions in suicidology. He is co-author of the 2008 book *Adolescent Suicide: An Integrated Approach to the Assessment of Risk and Protective Factors*. Dr. Gutierrez is an associate editor of the premier journal in the field—*Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, and he regularly reviews for numerous other journals. Previously, Dr. Gutierrez served on the Illinois Suicide Prevention Strategic Planning Task Force convened by the Illinois Department of Public Health. He ran the Adolescent Risk Project, a school-based suicide screening and assessment program at an urban high school for seven years.

Laura K. Harrawood, Ph.D., LCPC, LMFT, NCC has worked in numerous adjunct faculty positions while maintaining an active private practice. Her clinical work has focused on adult childhood survivors of abuse, mood disorders, grief and loss, as well as couple and family relational issues. Currently, she is Assistant Professor of Counseling at Idaho State University, where she teaches courses in the Mental Health Counseling program as well as the Marriage, Couple, and Family program. She is also active in the clinical supervision of Master's, Doctoral, and post-degree students. In addition, she is professionally involved in the Idaho Counseling Association and the Idaho Association for Counselor Education and Supervision.

Laurie Shepherd Johnson is Professor of Counseling and Director of the Graduate Programs in Counseling at Hofstra University in New York. Since 2001, she has also held the Sheelagh Murnaghan Visiting Professorship at Queens University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where she has taught, consulted, and conducted research on systemic approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation in this conflict traumatized society. Dr. Johnson also worked as a faculty associate for the United Nations University Institute on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity studying ethnic conflict in war-torn states. As part of her research on dialogue and narrative approaches toward reconciliation and post-traumatic healing in conflict societies, she has been working most recently on a project with the Quaker Community in West Belfast that is aimed at promoting cross-community contacts between paramilitary families.

She pursued a Fulbright Scholarship to continue her work in Cyprus, another nation traumatized by conflict, starting in 2006. In summer 2004, she presented a workshop at the International Institute on Peace Education in Istanbul on "Creating Safe Places for Cross-Community Dialogue in Divided Societies" and she completed a comparative study of Northern Ireland and Cyprus, which was presented

in Jerusalem in June 2005.

Dr. Johnson is certified in bereavement/thanatology and ARC Disaster Mental Health Services. She worked in disaster mental health relief efforts at Ground Zero and has provided bereavement support to the families and children bereaved by the 9/11 World Trade Center terrorist attacks since that time.

Don C. Locke is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Counselor Education at North Carolina State University. He retired in 2007 following a 42-year career in education. His counselor education career focused on multicultural counseling with special attention to African Americans. He published six books and more than 100 articles during his career. He currently enjoys retirement in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

Dr. Susan C. McGroarty is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Chestnut Hill College. She has a B.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Susan's scholarly interests include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, diversity, health psychology, and therapist well-being. She has considerable clinical expertise working with children, adolescents and adults in a private practice setting, and she has also conferred with community groups and organizations on issues related to post-traumatic stress and diversity. She serves on the Diversity Committee of NJPA. She is a licensed psychologist and is a member of APA, NJPA, AFTA, and SPSSI.

Dr. Jane E. Myers is Professor of Counselor Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a National Certified Counselor, a National Certified Gerontological Counselor, and a Licensed Professional Counselor. She is a Fellow of the American Counseling Association and a Charter Fellow of the Chi Sigma Iota Academy of Leaders for Excellence. She is a past President of the American Counseling Association and two of its divisions, the Association for Assessment in Counseling and the Association for Adult Development and Aging, for which she was founding President. Dr. Myers also served as Chair of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and was the second President of Chi Sigma Iota. In 2003, she was selected for inclusion in *Leaders and Legacies in Counseling*, a book that chronicles the contributions of the 25 individuals selected as among the most significant leaders in the counseling profession over the last century.

Dr. Myers developed a model and curriculum resources for the infusion of gerontological counseling into counselor education, co-authored the national competencies for training gerontological counselors, and co-produced eight training videotapes in gerontological

counseling. She has written and edited numerous publications, including 16 books and monographs, more than 125 refereed journal articles, and was noted twice, most recently in 2010, as being in the top 1% of contributors to the *Journal of Counseling & Development*, ACA's flagship journal. Her books include *Adult Children and Aging Parents*, *Empowerment for Later Life*, the co-authored *Handbook of Counseling, and Developmental Counseling and Therapy: Promoting Wellness Over the Lifespan*, co-authored with Allen and Mary Ivey and Tom Sweeney. She is co-author with Dr. Sweeney of one theoretical and two evidence-based models of wellness and assessment instruments based on these models.

Dr. Spencer Niles is Professor and Department Head for Counselor Education, Counseling Psychology, and Rehabilitation Services at the Pennsylvania State University. He is also Director of the Center for the Study of Career Development and Public Policy at Penn State. He also serves as Vice-President for International Development for Kuder, Inc. Dr. Niles is the recipient of the National Career Development Association's (NCDA) Eminent Career Award, a NCDA Fellow, an American Counseling Association (ACA) Fellow, ACA's David Brooks Distinguished Mentor Award, the ACA Extended Research Award, and the University of British Columbia Noted Scholar Award. He served as President for the National Career Development Association and Editor for *The Career Development Quarterly*. Currently, he is the Editor of the *Journal of Counseling & Development* and has authored or co-authored approximately 100 publications and delivered more than 100 presentations on career development theory and practice. He is an Honorary Member of the Japanese Career Development Association, Honorary Member of the Italian Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, and a Lifetime Honorary Member of the Ohio Career Development Association.

Dean W. Owen, Jr. is currently a professor at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey, where he rejoined the faculty following a visiting professorship in 2007. He graduated from the University of Florida in 1977 with a Ph.D. in Counselor Education and holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in Psychology and Rehabilitation Counseling from the University of South Florida in Tampa. In 1977, he joined the graduate faculty of Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky where he served for 32 years before retiring and being granted emeritus status in June 2009. He is a licensed professional clinical counselor with more than 34 years of clinical experience. Educational and psychological testing has been one of his principle teaching areas throughout his career. Dr. Owen

has extensive foreign teaching experience and twice served as a member of the European Faculty of Boston University. He is an active member of the European Branch of the American Counseling Association. His career has included teaching assignments in Germany, Belgium, England, Spain, Costa Rica, and Turkey.

Dr. Artis “Pete” Palmo is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Licensed Psychologist. He is CEO of Bethlehem Counseling Associates, P.C., a group private practice serving children, adolescents, and adults. He completed graduate training in Counseling at West Virginia University in 1971. He was a Professor of Counseling Psychology at Lehigh University for 17 years, followed by 22 years in private practice. He served various leadership positions in local, state, and national counseling organizations, including President of the Lehigh Valley Psychological Association, President of the Pennsylvania Counseling Association, and served on the boards of the American Counseling Association and the North Atlantic Region of the ACA. In addition, he was an active member of the American Mental Health Counselors Association from the early stages of the organization’s development. He served on licensure committees for both Pennsylvania and nationally with ACA. Dr. Palmo has written numerous articles, chapters, and books on a variety of counseling topics. He enjoys writing, sports, and spending time with friends. Along with his wife, Linda, they have two grown children and four grandchildren. They spend their leisure time traveling and playing golf.

Linda A. Palmo, Ed.D. has been in private practice as a Counseling Psychologist since 1980. She completed her doctorate at Lehigh University in 1984. Her work experiences have included being an elementary school teacher and counselor, serving as a counselor for special needs students in the schools, counseling college students, serving as a psychologist for a general hospital and rehabilitation center, and working in a variety of general outpatient agencies. Dr. Palmo was one of the founders of Bethlehem Counseling Associates, P.C. in 1987. She has written articles and chapters on a variety of topics, including an emphasis on family dynamics. She has served as a lecturer at many local, state, and national meetings. She enjoys working with individuals, families, and couples, and she specializes in health psychology, family counseling, and improving client coping skills and self-awareness.

Alishea Rowley is a doctoral student in the counselor education program at North Carolina State University. She earned a Master’s degree in counselor education from the University of Central Florida with concentrations in school counseling. Ms. Rowley has more than four years of professional counseling experience in a variety of set-

tings, including work as a school counselor with a specific focus on reducing high school retention rates, individual therapy, family therapy, and in-home counseling services, as well as co-teaching experiences for Master's level counseling courses. Her research interests are African American single mothers and health disparities within the African American community.

Dr. Russell A. Sabella is currently Professor of Counseling in the College of Education, Florida Gulf Coast University, and President of Sabella & Associates. His concentration of research, training, consultation, and publication includes individual and group counseling, counseling technology and tech-literacy, comprehensive school counseling programs, peer helper programs and training, sexual harassment risk reduction, solution-focused brief counseling/consultation, and solution-focused leadership and organizational development.

Dr. Sabella is author of numerous articles published in journals, magazines, and newsletters. He is co-author of two books entitled *Confronting Sexual Harassment: Learning Activities for Teens* (Educational Media, 1995) and *Counseling in the 21st Century: Using Technology to Improve Practice* (American Counseling Association, 2004). He is also author of the popular *SchoolCounselor.com: A Friendly and Practical Guide to the World Wide Web* (2nd edition; Educational Media, 2003); *GuardingKids.com A Practical Guide to Keeping Kids Out of High-Tech Trouble* (Educational Media Corporation, 2008); and well known for his Technology Boot Camp for Counselor workshops conducted throughout the country. Dr. Sabella is past President (2003–2004) of the American School Counselor Association.

He has trained and consulted with thousands of school counselors, educators, parents, and organizational leaders throughout the country.

Mary B. Seay, Ph.D. is currently a middle school counselor with the Allentown School District in Allentown, Pennsylvania. She previously taught in the Department of Psychology for Lehigh University, Muhlenberg College, DeSales University, and Kutztown University. While at Kutztown University, Dr. Seay also taught counseling courses for the Master's Degree programs. Dr. Seay has published in a number of psychology journals. She also has given numerous workshops, paper presentations, and research papers at local and national conferences. Dr. Seay is a member of several professional associations such as the Eastern Psychological Association and the American School Counseling Association.

Thomas A. Seay, Ph.D. is Professor Emeritus of Counseling at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, after having taught there for more than 30 years. In addition, he is currently Professor and Director

of the Master of Social Sciences in Counselling Psychology program at Hong Kong Shue Yan University in Hong Kong, China. Previously, he taught at Austin Peay State University, Southern Illinois University, Allentown College (now DeSales University), Lehigh University, and Chestnut Hill College. He has taught courses in Germany and Austria. He was an invited lecturer to the Diplomatic Academy in Moscow, Russia, and to Hong Kong Shue Yan University, where he was an invited keynote speaker. Over the years he has given many presentations at professional conferences, and he has conducted numerous workshops in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Dr. Seay has numerous journal publications, including two recent publications in one of the Asian counseling journals. He has published several books and monographs. In addition, Dr. Seay is a licensed psychologist and until recently maintained a private practice specializing in family addictions and couples therapy. He is a National Certified Counselor and an Approved Clinical Supervisor with the National Board for Certified Counselors. Also, he is a Clinical Member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

Dr. Seay is an Honored Board Member of the Asian Professional Counselling Association. In addition, he is a member of several other professional associations such as the American Counseling Association, Eastern Psychological Association, and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapists.

Laura R. Shannonhouse is a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and is a National Certified Counselor specializing in crisis intervention and disaster response. She has participated in culture-centered clinical outreach efforts within the United States (post-Katrina New Orleans and post-earthquake with Haitian communities in Florida), Southern Africa and Botswana (illness-related trauma), and Mexico (prolonged grief work). She has completed a two-year Gestalt Training program and volunteered at the Alachua County Crisis Center, both training and supervising other volunteers. Her experiences with disaster response naturally lend themselves to social justice concerns. Her interest and passion for advocacy and aging developed through her work with marginalized peoples and her desire to make a difference in some small way.

Natalie F. Spencer, MEd, LPC, NCC is a Counselor Education doctoral student at North Carolina State University. She earned her Master's Degree in School Counseling from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and she is a licensed professional counselor in the state of North Carolina. Ms. Spencer has more than five years of experience as a school counselor and therapist providing services to both children and adults. She has taught undergraduate and Master's-

level courses as well as provided supervision to counselors in training. Ms. Spencer's research focuses on multicultural counseling, racial identity, and the academic achievement of gifted/talented African American adolescents.

Dr. Howard B. Smith recently retired as Interim Dean and Professor Emeritus in the College of Education and Counseling at South Dakota State University in Brookings, South Dakota. He is a Nationally Certified Counselor, a Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselor, and a Licensed Professional Counselor in the state of Louisiana. He has private practice experience and has served as Department Head of the Counseling and Human Resource Department at South Dakota State University and the Educational Leadership and Counseling Department at the University of Louisiana–Monroe. Before going back to South Dakota, he was the Associate Executive Director for Professional Affairs at the American Counseling Association (ACA). While at ACA, he also taught as adjunct professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

Dr. Smith has a distinguished career in leadership positions, having served as President of the American Mental Health Counselors Association, and he has chaired numerous Committees of the American Counseling Association. He has received numerous awards, including the prestigious Carl Perkins Award for outstanding service to the profession in the area of public policy. More recently, he and two colleagues received the Experienced Researcher of the Year Award of the British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy for their work on the American Counseling Association's Practice Research Network. He has extensive experience in the area of Disaster Mental Health and has volunteered for the American Red Cross in response to more than 20 national disasters. He is widely published on a variety of counseling-related topics.

J. Michael Tyler, Ph.D. is Dean of Research at Baker College, Center for Graduate Studies. His research interests and publications cover a number of topics, including technology; small-group behavior; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues in counseling and business; and ethics. He has worked in various community mental health and human service settings and worked for ten years as a counselor educator and faculty member in a department of psychology. He is the co-author of *Using Technology to Improve Counseling Practice: A Primer for the 21st Century*, published by the American Counseling Association. Recently, he has become involved in the application of mental health and psychology issues in business settings. In addition, he is increasingly focusing his attention on issues of assessment in business and educational settings.

David Van Doren, Ed.D., LPC, LPsy, CCMHC, MAC, NCC is Associate Professor of Counselor Education at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater. Dr. Van Doren received his Ed.D. in Counselor Education at the University of Maine in 1981. He has been a counselor educator in Wisconsin for almost three decades. Dr. Van Doren maintains a private practice, which has included working with perpetrators of abuse, as well as others impacted by trauma. He has presented nationally and regionally on childhood maltreatment, the treatment of trauma, and intimate partner violence. Dr. Van Doren is a member of the American Counseling Association, American Mental Health Counselors Association, American Psychological Association, Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, Association for Specialists in Group Work, and International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation.

Erika Wagner-Martin, MS is a counselor who has experience with a wide range of issues, including intimate partner violence, sexual assault and sexual abuse, post-trauma symptoms, anxiety and mood disorders, career exploration, substance abuse, and women's issues. Her clinical interests also include gender identity and sexual orientation, self-empowerment, and family and intimate relationships. Ms. Wagner-Martin received her Master's Degree in Community Counseling at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater and also holds the National Certified Counselor Credential. Her approach to counseling is holistic, and she is committed to working with clients to honor their needs and build on their strengths in order to live more functional, healthy, and meaningful lives.

William J. Weikel, Ph.D. is Professor Emeritus at Morehead State University in Kentucky. He currently resides in Cape Coral, Florida, where he maintains a part-time consulting practice. He also occasionally teaches as an adjunct professor at Florida Gulf Coast University in the graduate counseling program. Dr. Weikel is an LPCC and has held numerous national certifications. He is a past President of AMHCA and the Kentucky Counseling Association and a past Chair of the Southern Region of ACA. In addition, he has chaired numerous committees in his more than 35-year career for ACA, AMHCA, and KCA. He was the founding editor of the *AMHCA Journal (JMHCA)* in 1979 and also editor of the *AMHCA News (Advocate)*, *KCA Journal*, and *KCA News*. Dr. Weikel has authored or co-authored more than 50 professional articles, monographs, and books. When not involved in counseling activities, he is busy with his business, "Patriot Rare Coin and Currency," specializing in early U.S. coins and obsolete currency. He can be found at many national coin bourses as well as Florida shows.

Hyung Joon Yoon, SPHR is a Ph.D. candidate in Workforce Education and Development at Penn State. He is also an instructor at Penn State, and he teaches a career development course for students in Counselor Education and Workforce Education and Development. Mr. Yoon has developed and/or validated career assessment tools such as the Assessment of Human Agency (AHA) and the Career Flow Index (CFI). In addition, he has created self-actualization-oriented career development models, called Human Agency Based Individual Transformation (HABIT) and the Integrative Cognitive Information Processing (ICIP). He also has been involved in the development of the Hope Centered Career Development theory with Dr. Spencer Niles. He has presented his work at National Career Development Association (NCDA) and Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) conferences.

Dr. Palmo dedicates this edition to his wife, Linda, whose encouragement and support make these professional accomplishments possible. He also wants to dedicate this work to Dr. Harold “Doc” Whitmore, his mentor, and Mr. Jack Superka, his friend and colleague. Both of these men were outstanding professionals, committed friends, and wonderful sources of laughter. Although the two of them will not be able to understand this dedication, it is important for Dr. Palmo to honor their accomplishments and mourn the loss of their companionship.

Dr. Weikel dedicates his work on the latest edition of this book to AMHCA pioneers and friends for 35 years: Dr. Ed Beck, Dr. Bill Krieger, Dr. Pete Palmo, Dr. Gary Seiler, and Dr. Howard Smith, and to both Dr. David Brooks and Mr. Robert Rencken (deceased). Without these people and a handful more, there would be no book and no profession of mental health counseling. Dr. Weikel would also like to thank his wife, Vanessa, children, Bill and Amanda, and granddaughter, Kaitlyn, for their love and support.

Dr. Borsos dedicates his work to Ethan, his parents, and his grandparents. You know who you are.

FOREWORD

The importance of mental health counseling has grown, as has the array of mental health issues that arise in an uncertain and a fragile world. As chronicled in this book, mental health counseling has evolved and matured across the four editions that have been published. Each edition has included new terrain that needs to be described and its treatment explained. Among the expanded content addressed to currently important topics in mental health counseling are those focused on the effects of terrorism and trauma and individual recovery and treatment. Each day, as more military personnel are committed by the United States and its allies to conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the uncertainty military and civilian populations experience in the non-violent but stressful and abusive relationships among nations, the need for more mental health counselors increases.

Regardless of the impact on mental health of the conflicts present among nations around the world, this book is not primarily about terrorism or trauma. It is also about the widening range of mental health issues that are now within the scope of treatments provided by mental health counselors. They include intimate partner violence, substance abuse, career counseling, mental health and aging, multiculturalism, and cultural conflict.

As suggested earlier, mental health counseling has evolved over the four editions of this book and, in doing so, has “come of age.” “Coming of age” means, as a central point, that mental health counselors have created, refined, and strengthened their professional identities. In doing so, they have differentiated themselves from other groups of mental health providers and focused on what they, as mental health counselors, can contribute to achieving mental health for those suffering from mental health problems.

The rise to professional maturity, to the “coming of age” as a profession, requires an understanding of the history of mental health counseling, the barriers it has surmounted as a profession, and the trends that have motivated its particular characteristics. More than half of the chapters in this book address the tools and constructs that undergird mental health counseling. They include the role of theory, assessment, research, ethics, and technolo-

gy, and the preparation of mental health counselors. Each of these chapters addresses what is different in each of these bodies of knowledge, as well as their integration to create the professional identity of mental health counselors. This identity is forged and reinforced in the work settings and the private practices in which mental health counselors are primarily employed.

Foundations of Mental Health Counseling (Fourth Edition) provides a comprehensive view of this important profession. The content of the book brings together multiple sources of knowledge: historical perspectives, conceptual models, the settings and clientele served by mental health counselors, the mental health issues that are dominant, the interventions used, and the professional identity and credentialing of mental health counselors. This information, while of major importance to mental health counselors, can also be useful to other mental health providers as they ponder the field and the ways in which they can collaborate with mental health counselors.

Foundations of Mental Health Counseling (Fourth Edition) is a unique book. It includes an excellent group of authors from a variety of settings to demonstrate the need for, the range, and the complexity of mental health counseling. Edited books rarely have a unified and an integrated structure. However, this book is an exception. It is well edited, the authors write well and with authority, and they do so from a number of important vantage points. The various chapters probe, with insight and relevance, major contemporary issues facing mental health counselors today.

Clearly, mental health counseling has “come of age.” Over the last 20 or so years, the profession has won important legislative and professional victories, including 50 state statutes providing licensure for professional counselors. The place of mental health counselors among mental health providers is secure, and all of the elements required to achieve professional identity and professional excellence are in place. Every mental health counselor will be enriched by this book’s analyses of the legacies of the past, the present, and the future. I endorse it without reservation.

EDWIN L. HERR
Distinguished Professor Emeritus
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

PREFACE

It has been 25 years since the original edition of *Foundations of Mental Health Counseling* was published. During that time, there have been countless positive changes in the field of mental health, including counselor licensure in all 50 states and the recognition of licensed professional counselors by managed care organizations and insurance companies. The field of professional counseling has developed and grown beyond the authors' expectations, becoming the true "fifth core mental health provider" as described in the First Edition of the book.

The First Edition highlighted the new mental health counselor, the Second Edition focused on the push to put the profession to the forefront of mental health care, and the Third Edition celebrated the profession's accomplishments. The Fourth Edition focuses on an in-depth examination of the field of mental health counseling, demonstrating the depth and breadth of professional counseling, from theory to practice issues, technology to humor in everyday practice, professional identity to diversity and multiculturalism, and much, much more.

Once again, the latest edition has been totally revised to reflect the status of professional counseling at this time. We have added 12 new authors in this Fourth Edition, all of whom have contributed to providing an up-to-date text for the student starting a career in professional counseling. Roughly 93% of the book has been rewritten and updated, providing the most comprehensive book on professional counseling anywhere.

As a special note, in the Fourth Edition, we have expanded the highly acclaimed section entitled "The Professional Counselor in a World of Uncertainty." We added a highlight section covering the stress faced by our military personnel and the role that mental health professionals can play in assisting the combat veterans to reintegrate back into the community. Also in this section, we added a chapter on "Trauma Counseling," an important aspect of professional counselors' role in their work with clients. There are improved and expanded chapters on career counseling, ethics, partner violence, multiculturalism, counselor preparation, and technology. The editors

have also expanded the final chapter of the book, “The Future of Professional Counseling,” to include a more comprehensive examination of what the future may bring to bear on the profession.

Finally, the editors want to thank all of the professional authors who contributed to our latest efforts. Through the hard work and dedication of these authors, we have been able to develop a book that provides Master’s- and Doctoral-level counseling students complete and accurate information regarding the field they have chosen to enter. We also thank the staff at Charles C Thomas for their input, patience, and guidance in the compilation of this book. As we have done with each of this book’s editions, we thank those professional men and women who have nurtured, guided, and pulled the field of professional counseling to the highest level possible. We dedicate this Fourth Edition to all of those professionals who offered and gave so much to the field of counseling and now face the end of their careers. The three of us have been privileged to work with many of the professionals (several are authors in this Fourth Edition) who brought the field of counseling from infancy to adulthood—we thank all of them!

A.J.P.
A.J.W.
D.P.B.

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FOUNDATIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING

Section I

MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Chapter 1

PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING COMES OF AGE: THE FIRST 35 YEARS

HOWARD B. SMITH AND WILLIAM J. WEIKEL

*In Memory of and with Appreciation to
David K. Brooks, Jr.*

In an organized sense, mental health counseling is a young discipline. At the time of this writing, the profession is not quite age 35, but it remains a dynamic discipline, where there is still active debate about professional identity, role, function, and professional preparation. When the history of mental health counseling is written in a more definitive fashion than is possible in 2010, the past and present generation of activists and true believers may discover that their professional careers have paralleled most of the profession's significant milestones and that they have had a hand in shaping their own destinies and that of their profession. Practitioners in few other fields have been able to make this claim. These first 30+ years have been dominated by establishing an identity, credentials, and recognition for the profession. Although these three dominant tasks are not yet complete, it is impossible to know what will evolve in the next 35 years. Thus, the history of mental health counseling is still very much in the process of becoming.

Although the profession is rather young, mental health counseling did not emerge full blown in 1976 with no previous history. A number of antecedents led to the founding of the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA) in that year, and certainly there were many individuals who were practicing mental health counselors (MHCs) before they began to apply the title to themselves and their work. These antecedents do not form a traceable and purposeful historical path, but each may be considered an essential thread, without which the fabric of the profession would be less than whole.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

The beginnings of contemporary approaches to the treatment of mental and emotional disorders are usually traced to the late 18th century. Prior to that time, persons suffering from mental and emotional disorders were either confined in asylums with wretched conditions and no systematic treatment or lived as itinerant paupers, driven from town to town. Earlier still, mental illness had been viewed as a spiritual disorder resulting from demonic possession and curable only by exorcism or burning at the stake.

Moral Treatment

The event usually credited with bringing about a change in attitude toward mental illness was the appointment in 1793 of Philippe Pinel as director of the Bicetre, the largest mental hospital in Paris. The French Revolution was in full flower, and Pinel brought the principles of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” to his new task. One of his first acts was to release the inmates from their chains. To the surprise of his critics, Pinel’s reforms worked. He forbade corporal punishment and used physical restraint only when his patients presented a danger to themselves or others. He introduced his methods to the Salpetriere, a hospital for women, when he was made director there in 1795. Pinel later wrote an influential book on institutionalized treatment, in which he developed a system for classifying various disorders and advocated the use of occupational therapy as an adjunct to treatment. He kept detailed statistics on the patient populations in his charge, and his claims of cure rates resulting from his methods are impressive even by contemporary standards (Murray, 1983).

At about the same time, William Tuke, a Quaker, founded the York Retreat in England. Although this was in many respects a utopian community, the Retreat focused on providing a restful, orderly environment in which those suffering from emotional disorders could return to normal functioning.

During the first half of the 19th century in the United States, a number of reformers, most notably Dorothea Dix, were successful in founding private asylums and state hospitals operated on humane principles similar to those advanced by Pinel and Tuke. These highly structured environments emphasized the removal of distressed persons from their families or other accustomed settings, manual labor, regular religious devotions, and systematic educational programs aimed at redirecting thought patterns and teaching self-control. This combination of what would be known today as milieu therapy and psychoeducational programming represented a significant alternative to both the medical and custodial models of treatment. Crucial to the success of these institutions was the role of the attendants as models of appro-

priate behavior (Sprafkin, 1977).

Following the Civil War, however, there was a dramatic change in patterns of institutionalized care. The state asylums were required to accept a broader range of patients, including alcoholics, the criminally insane, and apparently deranged immigrant paupers. The generation of antebellum reformers had done an inadequate job of choosing and training their successors. Thus, as they retired or died, new hospital superintendents were installed who were unfamiliar with the humanitarian ideals of their predecessors. Levels of funding declined from both public and private sources. Furthermore, the medical model of treatment reasserted itself as medicine became a more organized discipline. As Sprafkin (1977) points out, these factors combined to seal the doom of moral treatment approximately 75 years after it began.

During the next half century, conditions related to the care of the institutionalized mentally ill declined steadily. For all intents, state hospitals and most of the private asylums were little more than warehouses for society's castoffs. Once committed, patients rarely emerged to reenter anything resembling a normal life. A significant and most fortunate exception to this pattern was Clifford W. Beers, who had spent much of his youth and early adulthood in a series of institutions. In 1908, Beers published *A Mind That Found Itself*, an autobiographical account of his experiences in mental hospitals. The heightened public interest created by his book led Beers to found the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in 1909. This organization acted as an advocate for the humane treatment of the mentally ill and was the forerunner of the present National Mental Health Association. These groups have had a powerful, positive impact on public policy related to mental health issues for the last century.

Clifford Beers' early efforts in the area of mental health reform occurred during the Progressive Era, a period of American history characterized by intense activity in a variety of social concerns. Progressive reformers directed their energies toward economic justice by the passage of antitrust legislation and toward improving the lot of the urban poor by the founding of settlement houses, among other activities. Beer's ideas fell on fertile ground during this period.

Vocational Guidance

Youth unemployment was a major problem at the turn of the 20th century. Frank Parsons, another Progressive reformer, focused his energies in this area, working first at the Bread Winners Institute, which was operated by a settlement house, and later founding the Boston Vocational Bureau. Parsons was one of the first to be aware of the tremendous change in occupational choices presented by rapid industrialization coupled with the social disloca-

tion created by the movement of entire families from failed farms to the burgeoning cities. This experience was particularly bewildering for older boys who had been accustomed to working on the farms and whose potential wages were needed for family support, but who found that they lacked both the skills and the needed orientation to an industrialized workplace (Whiteley, 1984).

The purpose of the Boston Vocational Bureau, founded in 1908, was to work with young men to match their interests and aptitudes with appropriate occupational choices. Parsons described his procedures in *Choosing a Vocation* (1909), a short and straightforward work that details a process of interviewing, rudimentary motor skills testing, and providing information about various occupations. Frank Parsons died shortly after founding the Vocational Bureau and before his book was published, but his efforts led to the first national conference on vocational guidance in 1910, sponsored by the Boston Chamber of Commerce (Whiteley, 1984). Later, in 1913, the National Vocational Guidance Association (NVGA) was founded to foster vocational guidance services in schools and to encourage the advancement of this new profession by providing a forum for the exchange of ideas among practitioners.

Moral treatment and vocational guidance are the two major historical antecedents of the mental health counseling movement. Moral treatment is crucial for its emphasis on the potential of disturbed persons for recovery and its early anticipation of psychoeducational methods as viable treatment modalities. Vocational guidance is important for its establishment of the role of the professional counselor, although much of that original role has changed and expanded in the years since. In the same sense that the Progressive Era's settlement houses gave birth to the profession of social work, the early vocational guidance programs often found in these same institutions were the incubator of modern mental health counseling.

ANTECEDENTS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

In addition to moral treatment and vocational guidance, there were a number of other antecedents necessary to the development of mental health counseling. Among these were advances in testing and assessment technologies, the emergence of nonmedical approaches to psychotherapy, research and theory building focused on normal human development, innovations in group counseling and psychotherapy, and the development of psychoeducational approaches to treatment. Each of these antecedents in professional practice is sketched briefly in this section.

Testing and Assessment

Prior to the early years of the 20th century, estimation of human abilities and aptitudes was based largely on speculation about the relationship between intelligence and heredity. Educational achievement of the time was more closely related to socioeconomic status than to intellectual ability, with the “sons of riches” (Green, 1985) almost always receiving a superior education regardless of their level of mental ability.

Two French psychologists, Alfred Benet and Theodore Simon, were commissioned by their government to study ways of detecting measurable differences between normal and retarded children so that placement into special education programs would be facilitated for those who needed such experiences. Their work resulted in a series of standardized tasks that could be performed by children of different mental ages. The concept of mental age led to the development of the intelligence quotient (IQ) as a standard measure of intellectual ability.

This was the beginning of widespread and sustained activity in testing and assessment that has continued throughout the years. Group intelligence tests emerged with the United States’ entry into World War I and became a fixture in the public schools shortly thereafter. Tests of specific aptitudes were first developed for selection of streetcar motormen in 1912 and now measure everything from musical ability to clerical speed. Vocational interest measurement achieved statistical respectability and acquired greater utility through the work of E. K. Strong and G. Frederic Kuder.

Personality assessment is yet another area in which measurement specialists have been extremely active. The first objective personality test was developed by Edward Elliott in 1910. The publication of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) by McKinley and Hathaway (1940) paved the way for the systematic application of standardized measures to the diagnosis of mental and emotional disorders. Another category of personality measures is projective instrumentation, the most prominent of which are the Rorschach inkblot test, first published in 1921, and the Thematic Apperception Test, initially developed in 1938.

As pointed out by Brooks and Weikel (1996), advances have been made in clinical assessment as well. Despite the present sophistication of both objective and projective measures, mental health practitioners in several disciplines have found that such approaches are often insufficient to adequately diagnose a client’s difficulties. The multiaxial scheme presented in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) is widely used, as are a variety of behavioral assessment procedures.

Perhaps the most challenging assessment issue confronting mental health counselors and allied professionals involves evaluation of treatment outcomes. Demonstrated therapeutic effectiveness is being demanded by government funding sources, private insurance carriers, and managed care plans. Research that has been underway for nearly three decades continues to attempt to more accurately describe what happens in the process of behavior change and to measure its progress in both process and outcome dimensions. One of the most promising methods of gathering these data comes in the form of Practice Research Networks (PRNs). This method of data gathering, first initiated by the American Psychiatric Association in the early 1990s, is now being developed by virtually all mental health care provider professions. It provides a method of gathering information on predetermined data elements by practitioners and measuring the efficacy of treatment in terms of client outcomes directly from the clients themselves.

Nonmedical Approaches to Psychotherapy

Prior to World War II, psychotherapy was practiced almost exclusively by psychiatrists or nonphysician therapists who relied on medical models of treatment. *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (1942) was the first of several works in which Carl Rogers, a clinical psychologist by training, advocated client-centered therapy, now known as the person-centered approach. Rogers had no use for diagnostic labels or prescriptive methodologies. It was his conviction that individuals, regardless of how bizarre their symptoms might appear, have within themselves the resources for positive behavior change. He stressed that the conditions of the relationship between counselor and client are the primary medium through which such change occurs. It is difficult to imagine an approach to psychotherapy that is more at variance with the traditional medical model.

The various behavior therapies have been almost as influential as Rogers, although they differ considerably from his basic tenets. Based on principles of learning and conditioning, the behavior therapies view emotional disorder as the result of faulty learning. Because maladaptive behavior has been learned, it can be unlearned and replaced with new behaviors that are more advantageous to the individual. A more recent version is cognitive-behavioral therapy, which emphasizes the role of cognitions as mediators between stimulus and response.

The postwar era has witnessed the propagation of a number of other non-medical approaches. Although none of these has had the widespread impact of the person-centered approach or the behavior therapies, each of them claims a substantial number of adherents. Among these are reality therapy, gestalt therapy, humanistic-existentialist therapies, transactional analysis, ra-

tional-emotive-behavioral therapy (a type of cognitive-behavioral therapy), family systems approaches, neurolinguistic programming, narrative therapy, and solution-focused brief therapy.

One powerful mitigating circumstance on all of these approaches has been the managed care phenomenon. The influence of managed care on these approaches has had at least two profound results because of the conflicting philosophies of mental health care and the managed care environment. Mental health care has the driving philosophy of doing whatever it takes for as long as it takes to affect some level of cure or positive growth in the client. Managed care, in contrast, is driven by its bottom line motive of minimum necessary care. They want the client to return to functioning and work as soon as possible. They do not reimburse for rapport building or what we might call “personal growth,” only for the minimum necessary for a return to productivity. This has led to the growing popularity of the solution-focused and other brief therapies.

Theories of Normal Human Development

Increased research and theory building in the area of abnormal human behavior accompanied the emergence of psychology as a scientific discipline in the late 19th century. Normal development, with the exception of inquiry into sensation and perception, was not regarded as worthy of scientific study. Although Sigmund Freud (1905/1953, 1923/1961) posited the first comprehensive theory of human development, his interest was in psychopathology not normal behavior.

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) was a Swiss developmental psychologist whose work forms a foundation for much of what is currently accepted about normal human development. Most of Piaget’s research was concentrated on the cognitive development of young children, but more recent investigators have applied some of his basic principles to other areas of human functioning as well as tracking developmental processes across the lifespan. Examples of this activity include Kohlberg’s (1973) stages of moral development, Perry’s (1970) formulations of intellectual and ethical development in college students, and Selman’s (1976, 1977) studies of social perspective-taking in young children.

Closely related to the cognitive-developmental school is the work of Jane Loevinger (1976) in ego development. Focusing on the ego as the “master trait,” Loevinger’s research has resulted in the identification of 10 stages of ego development. According to Rodgers (1980), cognitive-developmental theorists (including Loevinger) focus on the “how” of human development, whereas psychosocial developmental theorists concern themselves with the “what.” Erik Erikson was the best-known theorist of the psychosocial group.

For him, lifespan development consisted of eight developmental crises, each of which involves resolution of a crisis of polar opposite dimensions of an individual's life (Brooks & Weikel, 1996).

It should be apparent that there is much diversity of opinion among the various theorists as to what constitutes normal development. There are some common elements or themes that tend to tie the various schools together. Most of the theorists agree that the interaction between person and environment is critical to satisfactory development in virtually all dimensions. There is also general agreement about the presence of a motivating force or organizing structure at work within the individuals. With respect to the nature of the developmental process, most theorists agree that within normal individuals, development is relatively orderly, sequential, generally stage-related but not necessarily age-related, and cumulative, and it proceeds from simple to complex structures and/or operations (Brooks, 1984). These common themes allow the sketching of a rough model of normal human behavior that is descriptive of development at various points along the lifespan depending on which theory one is using as a referent. Practitioners may thus assess their clients according to multiple dimensions of functioning.

Group Counseling and Psychotherapy

Like several of the antecedents discussed thus far, the origins of group counseling and psychotherapy can also be traced to the early years of the 20th century. According to Gazda (1982), the earliest application of the group medium for treatment purposes was in 1905 when J. H. Pratt used group meetings to instruct tuberculosis patients in hygienic practices. Although Pratt originally began this practice to save time, he noticed that the effects of group interaction tended to increase the attention patients paid to his instructions. Another American pioneer was L. C. Marsh, who used a variety of group techniques to treat hospitalized schizophrenics. Marsh's motto, "By the crowd they have been broken; by the crowd they shall be healed" (quoted in Gazda, 1982, p. 9), summarized the beliefs of many pioneers in group counseling and psychotherapy.

It might be expected that the Viennese psychiatric schools would have contributed to the early development of therapeutic group work, and, indeed, this was the case. As early as 1921, Alfred Adler, who had previously broken with Freud and established his own system of psychotherapy, was conducting therapeutic interviews with children before audiences of his fellow therapists. Although he initiated this practice for purposes of training, Adler noticed differences in the progress made by his young clients in the presence of a group. He began to involve the group more in the interview process and developed what would today be known as multiple therapy (i.e.,

more than one therapist working with a client simultaneously). Adler's followers in the United States have modified his practices to incorporate family therapy into the group interview process (Brooks & Weikel, 1996).

Jacob Moreno was another Viennese therapist who began his work with groups of prostitutes. Immigrating to the United States in 1925, he was extremely influential in the development of modern group therapy, coining the term in 1932 (Gazda, 1982). Moreno is principally known for his work in psychodrama, "an extension of group psychotherapy in which there is not just verbalization but the situation is acted out in as realistic a setting as possible" (Moreno & Elefthery, 1982, p. 103). Although Moreno's name is synonymous with psychodrama, it was several years before he was given credit for his influence in the development of a number of other approaches to group work.

There are at present group applications for virtually every major system of individual counseling and psychotherapy. The range of therapeutic possibilities open to counselors and clients is thus expanded by the tremendous activity in the group work arena over the past 90 years and particularly those developments of the past four decades.

Mental health counseling has been especially influenced by developments in group counseling and psychotherapy because much of the research, theory building, and practice of the last 40 years have been done by individuals primarily identified with the counseling profession. The works of George Gazda, Merle Ohlsen, Walter Lifton, Don Dinkmeyer, and Gerald Corey are standard reading in virtually every graduate counseling program.

Psychoeducational Approaches to Treatment

As was shown to be the case with group counseling and psychotherapy, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact beginnings of psychoeducational approaches to treatment. Most writers agree that such approaches did not exist in the professional literature prior to the 1960s. Several commentators (Authier, Gustafson, Guernsey, & Kasdorf, 1975; Gazda & Brooks, 1985) emphasize the impact of Carl Rogers and his associates (Rogers, Gendlin, Kiesler, & Truax, 1967) in specifying the conditions under which behavior change is most likely to occur. Authier et al. (1975) also recognize the role played by Skinner and his fellow behaviorists in providing the basis for the technology of psychoeducational approaches.

Regardless of their origins, psychoeducational approaches are different from other approaches to treatment in that they emphasize the client as learner rather than as patient and cast the role of the mental health professional as teacher rather than as healer. In other words, such approaches are the antithesis of the medical model. Often called "training-as-treatment,"

these approaches assume that the client is merely deficient in skills needed for effective living, rather than being sick and in need of a cure. The counselor's task, therefore, is to teach the necessary skills in a systematic way so that they can be applied not only to the presenting problem but generalized to other areas of the client's life as well.

An impressive array of skills training programs and packages has emerged in the past 40 years. Included among these have been programs in interpersonal communication skills (Carkhuff, 1969a, 1969b; Egan, 1982; Gazda, Asbury, Balzer, Childers, & Walters, 1984; Ivey & Authier, 1978), assertiveness training (Alberti & Emmons, 1970; Galassi & Galassi, 1977; Lange & Jakubowski, 1976), relaxation training (Bernstein & Borkovec, 1973; Benson, 1975), and rational thinking (Ellis & Harper, 1975). More recently, we have training for individuals who are first responders to disasters or crises using critical incident stress debriefing (Mitchell, 1983).

Professionals identifying themselves as mental health counselors were not involved in the development of all of these training programs, but the impact of these programs on the practice of mental health counseling has been profound. It would be difficult to find mental health counselors, except perhaps those of an orthodox psychoanalytic orientation, who did not use psychoeducational methods in their work with clients. This is not to say that these approaches constitute the major component of a mental health counselor's skills, but they have found favor in dealing with such client issues as stress management, low self-esteem, poor social interactions, or bothersome and counterproductive reactions to crisis situations. There is little doubt that the practice of mental health counseling would be difficult if psychoeducational skills training methodologies had not been developed.

LEGISLATION AND PUBLIC POLICY

So far, this chapter has traced historical and professional practice precursors that were necessary for the emergence of mental health counseling in the late 1970s. These antecedents were the result of both societal trends and movements and professional advances within the mental health disciplines. To have major impact, however, both societal phenomena and significant shifts in treatment must find expression in political actions. It is therefore safe to say that mental health counseling would probably not have developed at all had it not been for a series of legislative initiatives spanning more than half a century. It is almost equally certain that the future development of mental health counseling depends to a considerable extent on the outcome of future legislative decisions.

Legislation Affecting the Development of the Counseling Profession

Professional counseling received its initial legislative mandate in the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917. The National Vocational Guidance Association had been founded four years earlier, and youth unemployment was still a major social priority. The Smith-Hughes Act, like its predecessors the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, represented a major federal excursion into education funding, a matter traditionally left to the states. Although the intent of Smith-Hughes was focused on funding vocational education program, a section of the law provided for vocational guidance programs in public schools. Vocational guidance was supported by at least three other vocational education acts prior to World War II. Among the key provisions of these acts was funding for vocational guidance leadership positions within state departments of education. Such funding was continued well into the 1970s. Following World War II, Congress enacted legislation providing for veterans' educational benefits that included funds for vocational guidance services. These benefits were later extended to veterans of the Korean conflict (Brooks & Weikel, 1996).

Federal legislative initiatives in support of vocational guidance were important for the future development of mental health counseling because such acts reinforced the professionalization of counseling and provided funds for the delivery of counseling services. The fact that counselors focused almost entirely on vocational issues during this time is less important than the emergence of counseling prior to 1950 as a unique human services profession.

The impact of counseling in educational settings was further enhanced by the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958. This act provided a major funding source for school-based counseling services and for university programs to train counselors. Passed in part as a reaction to the launching of the Sputnik satellite by the former Soviet Union, NDEA was designed to help the United States overcome what were perceived as serious educational deficiencies. Of particular concern was the relatively low number of youth expressing interest in careers in mathematics and the physical sciences. Remedies supported by NDEA included a testing program to identify students with math and science abilities. Test results were to be used to "counsel" promising students to enter these career fields. Other titles of the act provided support for vastly expanded secondary school guidance programs and for university-sponsored institutes to train new counselors to staff these programs. Many of the more than 600 graduate counselor education programs that are training mental health counselors today originated as a result of NDEA funding to train secondary school counselors.

The NDEA was renewed and amended in 1964, with new titles aimed at the support of counseling programs in elementary schools and community colleges. Funds for counseling socially and economically disadvantaged students, especially at the elementary school level, were provided by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The Emergency School Assistance Act (ESAA) of 1971 funded additional school counselors to assist in the desegregation of school districts. Later in that decade, the Education Amendments of 1976 (PL 94-142) strengthened the role of counseling in vocational education programs and authorized an administrative unit for counseling and guidance in the U.S. Office of Education. Although a few more recent federal initiatives have provided funding for school counseling programs, none of these can be construed as having an impact on the development of mental health counseling.

The importance of NDEA and subsequent federal education legislation to mental health counseling lies in the impact of these laws on counselor education programs and on the economics of supply and demand as it affected counseling positions. Encouraged by federal funding and supplemented by other funding sources, schools and colleges of education were turning out counselors at rates that showed little regard for the demands of the marketplace. Birthrates were declining by the late 1960s, a phenomenon that resulted in lower school enrollments. The drain on national resources created by the combination of federal spending on the Vietnam War and on the Great Society social initiatives (Lyndon Johnson's promise that the nation could afford both guns and butter) led to an economic recession in the early 1970s that took its toll on public school budgets. The combined effect of counselor oversupply and the reduced number of school counselor positions was predictable: Those counselors entering the field increasingly found positions in nonschool settings (Brooks & Weikel, 1996). A quiet revolution was begun, to which we return later.

In the more recent past, several pieces of federal legislation that have had an impact on mental health counselors serve as examples that mental health counseling is still active in shaping public policy. In 1996, the Mental Health Parity Act established minor federal requirements on the coverage of mental health services by most private sector health plans. The 1997 Balanced Budget Act included language prohibiting Medicaid and Medicare managed care programs from discriminating against providers on the basis of their type of license. Perhaps the legislation that had the greatest impact on practice was the 1998 Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which led to the development of federal health information privacy standards affecting all health care delivery in the United States. Also in 1998, the Health Professions Education Partnership Act established Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) eligibility for an array of federal health pro-

fessional training and support programs. In 2000, the Department of Defense authorization act set up a TRICARE demonstration project allowing LPCs to practice independently under the TRICARE Programs. Finally, the Veterans Benefits Healthcare and Information Technology Act of 2006 seems to be opening the door for MHCs to practice within the Veterans Affairs (VA) system. Negotiations for this expansion are being held among the administration, ACA, AMHCA, NBCC, AAMFT, and others as this chapter is being written.

Legislation Affecting the Delivery of Mental Health Services

The National Committee for Mental Hygiene (NCMH), founded by Clifford Beers during the Progressive Era, was quite active in improving mental hygiene education and patient treatment prior to and immediately following World War I. The National Mental Health Association, the successor to NCMH, along with professional organizations representing a variety of mental health disciplines, has been a persuasive advocate for mental health legislation in the period since World War II. The National Mental Health Act was passed in 1946, authorizing the establishment of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). The NIMH has in turn supported the training of psychiatrists, clinical and counseling psychologists, and psychiatric nurses.

The Joint Commission on Mental Illness was established by the National Mental Health Study Act of 1955. The findings of the commission provided the basis for congressional passage of the Community Mental Health Centers Act of 1963. This act provided federal funds to states to plan, construct, and staff community mental health centers and to develop multidisciplinary treatment teams of professionals and paraprofessionals. Funding extensions were passed in 1965, 1970, and 1975, each of which expanded services to a broader population.

The Carter Administration's commitment to improvement of mental health services was first manifested in the 1978 report of the President's Commission on Mental Health, chaired by First Lady Rosalynn Carter. The report revealed problems and inadequacies in the mental health services delivery system and emphasized the need for community-based services, including long- and short-term care, access to continuity of care, changes to meet the needs of special populations, and adequate financing. Also addressed was the tension among the mental health professions. The Mental Health Systems Act of 1980 was based on the commission's recommendations and emphasized "balanced services," with appropriate attention to both preventive and remedial programs. This legislation mandated new services for children, youth, the elderly, minority populations, and the chronically

mentally ill. The act was repealed almost before the ink was dry as the result of severe federal budget cuts for social programs during the first year of the Reagan Administration.

Federal mental health legislation since 1963 has been important to the development of mental health counseling for two reasons. First, the gradual evolution of models for community-based care of persons formerly housed in state hospitals has had profound effects on these individuals and their families as well as society at large. These effects will be dealt with in more detail in the next section. Second, the emergence of the community mental health center has provided a rich environment in which the counseling profession could develop and expand from its previous history in educational settings. The “quiet revolution,” referred to earlier, continued as graduates of counselor education programs found that their skills were effective with populations and in settings other than those for which they had originally been trained. They gradually realized that they had been limiting themselves in the application of their skills, rather than the skills they possessed being limiting factors.

These pioneer mental health counselors found, however, that there was much that they needed to know that was not covered by traditional counselor education curricula. They filled in the gaps in their knowledge base by additional coursework, in-service training, by consultation with and supervision from other mental health professionals on the center staffs, and ongoing clinical experience. The presence of counselors in community mental health centers had an interactive effect as well, as they shared their expertise with their colleagues, especially in areas involving consultation and community education. Still missing in the early 1970s, however, was a coherent professional identity for counselors working in the centers and other community settings (Brooks & Weikel, 1996). This deficit would not be remedied for several more years.

OTHER OUTCOMES OF FEDERAL MENTAL HEALTH LEGISLATION

It is clear that federal mental health legislative initiatives have had a profound impact on the development of mental health counseling as a profession. The establishment of community mental health centers in particular provided the entrée for counselors to move from primarily educational settings to community settings serving a much more varied population. It is also worthwhile to note that several other outcomes of mental health legislation since World War II. Among these are the development of community-based delivery systems, the impact of the NIMH, and the organized efforts of com-

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piangere, senza batter palpebra, con una specie di attonitaggine nuova.

«Quand'ebbi finito di dire, ed essi d'interrogare, ed il vecchio di scrivere nel registro, il medico (ora lo chiamo così) si chinò e disse all'orecchio dell'altro una parola che io non compresi; ma tosto, seguendo il movimento della penna dello scrivente, lessi: *lipemania*.

«Che voleva dire? io non aveva mai udito quella parola ma ne intesi subito il significato.

« — Mastro Paolo è pazzo? ebbi la forza di chiedere.

«Non mi risposero.

« — Guarirà? insistei.

« — Senza dubbio, figliuolo mio, mi disse il medico; senza dubbio.

« — E lo guarirà lei, signore?

« — Io stesso, figliuolo, coll'aiuto dell'arte, della natura e del tempo....

« — E quanto tempo occorre perchè un pazzo guarisca?

« — Un paio di settimane, qualche volta più.... qualche volta meno.

«Il vecchio teneva il capo basso e non diceva parola.

« — Ed io? balbettai... potrò venire a vederlo?

« — Tu rimarrai qui finchè mastro Paolo sia guarito, disse il vecchio, che era il direttore del luogo... se ti piace.

«Pensa se accettassi! La gratitudine mi diede le lagrime che mi aveva negato il dolore.

«Mi fu dato uno stanzino in casa del vecchio; uno stanzino pulito, con bei mobili, con un bel lettuccio, in cui non potei chiuder occhio la prima notte, tanto si stava bene.

«Pensavo: babbo Paolo avrà uno stanzino come questo ed un lettuccio come questo?

«Al giorno successivo trovai panni nuovi e biancheria di bucato; non usciva già dalle mie valigie; non sapevo che dire; mi tornavano in mente i racconti delle fate, e Milano mi pareva una città di incantesimi.

«Il signor Fulgenzio, così si chiamava la mia buona fata, mi parlava rare volte, ma amorevole. Non osavo chiedere di rivedere il babbo, per paura stesse peggio, e perchè temevo di far dispiacere ai buoni che mi avevano colmato di tanti benefizi; ma il vecchio direttore fu il primo a dirmi che potevo andare da mastro Paolo quando volessi.

«Ci andai subito.

«Ah! Donnina mia, quale spettacolo orribile! vedere tanta gente, tutta fatta come noi, che pare sana e robusta, e dire che non ragiona, che non sa pensare nè amare! Quella prima impressione come di sgomento cedette ad un dolore più profondo, perchè, appena mastro Paolo mi vide, diede in ismanie, e mi venne incontro coi pugni stretti, dicendomi che io gli aveva strappato il cuore, che io gli aveva ucciso le sue creature. Appena fu acquetato mi volse le spalle e passeggiò per la sala senza più badare a me, finalmente sedette in un canto e prese a guardarmi curiosamente, come se mi vedesse per la prima volta.

« — Babbo, gli dissi colla voce tremante, babbo...

«Non mi rispose.

« — Mastro Paolo, mastro Paolo! e muovevo un passo incontro a lui.

«Ma egli si raggomitò nel suo cantuccio e mostrò di aver paura di me, e mi scongiurò col gesto di non fargli male...

«Mi arrestai, e mormorai ancora una volta: «babbo!»

«Il disgraziato non mi conosceva più, e continuava a guardarmi con quel suo sguardo attonito e curioso.

«Passarono otto giorni senza che osassi più venire innanzi al vecchio. Quando l'osai fui accolto alla stessa maniera; solamente non si adirò

meco, ma la ripugnanza e la paura mi facevano più male della sua collera.

«Un'altra volta, mentre io me ne stavo in un canto a guardarlo con tenerezza compassionevole, ed egli era là, immobile, fingendo di non vedermi, ma gettandomi ogni tanto uno sguardo fuggitivo, venne il dottore. Allora fui testimone del singolare potere che aveva dato a quest'uomo la benevolenza schietta e quasi ruvida, perchè, appena egli fu entrato, mastro Paolo gli venne incontro trasfigurato in viso, e gli prese la mano colla gioia riconoscente d'un uomo scampato ad un pericolo.

«Mi allontanai coll'anima in tumulto.

«Il dottore mi raggiunse subito dopo, e mi pose confidenzialmente una mano sull'omero.

« — È inutile ch'io rimanga qui, balbettai, l'orrore che egli prova per me mi dice che non potrà amarmi mai; quando egli sarà guarito, io non avrò padre ugualmente — non ho più padre.

« — Non hai più padre perchè quella è pazzia di cui non si guarisce in quell'età se non colla morte. Fa conto che sia morto.

«La durezza di queste parole era temperata dall'accento — e me ne dolsi solo per l'uomo che fino allora avevo chiamato padre. A me non pensai.

« — Ebbene, dissi, bisogna che io lasci questo luogo, e pensi a guadagnarmi la vita.

« — Che sai fare tu?

« — So leggere, scrivere e far di conto; sono andato alla scuola ed ho voglia di studiare.

« — Non altro?

« — No, ma imparerò.

« — E intanto?...

«Il dottore mi lasciò in pensiero. Il giorno successivo fui chiamato nella camera del mio vecchio ospite.

« — Quanti anni hai? mi chiese.

« — Sedici.

« — Io ne ho cinquantaquattro; potrei quasi essere tuo nonno; vuoi esser mio figlio?»

— Suo figlio! esclama mamma Teresa sollevandosi quattro buoni pollici sulla sedia e girando intorno uno sguardo pieno di dubitosa meraviglia.

— Suo figlio! ripete più forte il signor maestro curvandosi a leggere egli stesso dietro le spalle della giovinetta, la quale non pare punto commossa, e risponde col sorriso sereno alla ingenua curiosità dei due vecchi.

Mamma Teresa, trasfigurata in volto, cogli occhi immobilmente fissi nelle labbra di Donnina, vi legge le parole prima che la fanciulla le proferisca.

«Non risposi; quell'improvvisa proposta era così straordinaria, e le porte dischiusemi per essa mi lasciavano vedere un mondo così diverso da quello immaginato dianzi, che mi parve tutt'uno come se mi si proponesse un'altra vita, in un altro mondo, sotto un cielo di altro colore.

« — Dice davvero! esclamai; suo figlio! e che ho da fare io per divenire suo figlio?

« — Nulla.

« — Ma allora lei mi vuol bene, se vuol essere mio padre! E che ho fatto io perchè lei mi voglia bene?

« — Nulla; tu hai sedici anni, ed io non ho un figlio; vuoi tu essere quello?

« — E mastro Paolo? mormorai, che dirà mastro Paolo?

« — Non saprà nulla.

«Mi passò in mente che io stessi per commettere una bassezza e che fosse dover mio rinunciare alle gioie finchè il vecchio babbo soffriva. Anche ora sono talvolta assalito da tali dubbi, ed oggi il tormento è più forte.

«Ma potevo io gettarmi nel mondo, senza consiglio, senza mezzi, senza professione?

«Pensai allo squallore che la sorte, oggi così lusinghiera, poteva minacciarmi domani, pensai che mi si offriva di scegliere tra la miseria e la pace, tra l'andar ramingo e l'avere una casa ed un nome, ricordai l'orrore intenso mostrato per me dal vecchio babbo, ed accettai l'offerta sciogliendo un inno puerile di grazie.

«Pochi giorni dopo, il signor Fulgenzio compieva ciò che mastro Paolo aveva voluto fare, senza indurvisi mai: mi dava il suo nome, mi faceva suo figlio di adozione.

«Ecco il mio segreto, Donnina: io ho un padre che non è mastro Paolo, ed il disgraziato non è morto, come ti ha detto, ma agonizza fra le care larve dei suoi veri figli.

«Io non mi nascondo come questa che pare la mia fortuna sia la mia colpa; dovevo accettare la miseria, l'abbandono, l'oscurità, le lotte della vita, ma non tradire quell'uomo che mi aveva primo chiamato a far parte della sua famiglia. Io l'ho lasciato solo nella sventura per far me lieto — accettai di vestire di gai colori la mia sciagura, volli entrare nella schiera degli eletti, io reietto da colei che fu mia madre! Che penserai tu di me? Potrai tu essere più benigna di me stesso? E con quali occhi vedrai la mia arrendevolezza alle prime carezze della sorte? Ho un nome, ho una famiglia, sto per avere una posizione onorata nel mondo; una sola cosa mi manca — la stima di me medesimo.

«E quando tu saprai che l'uomo stesso da cui fui chiamato figlio, non ricava dal suo beneficio altro che l'ingratitude? Tanta è la miseria, Donnina mia, che questa stessa ingratitude è il solo mio orgoglio, la mia sola virtù. Sappilo, fra il vecchio ed il nuovo padre, il mio cuore è rimasto orfano, la mia sorte non si è mutata. Quest'uomo, di

cui porto il nome, non mi ama, non mi ha amato mai; volle pagare alla virtù a cui non crede, alla società che disprezza, alla famiglia che offende collo scetticismo nella donna, il suo debito d'uomo, di cittadino, di figlio: volle fare un'opera buona ed un ingrato. Egli lo sapeva già prima, e mi disprezzava già prima che io cessassi d'amarlo. Perchè io l'ho amato come si può amare un vero padre, e forse lo amo ancora.

«Quanto debole ed intristito ti parrà il mio cuore!

«E non mi accuserai dentro di te di averti dimenticata sei anni per aver mutato fortuna? E non crederai Mario (quest'è la mia livrea d'oggi), vergognoso dei cenci di Ognissanti?

«Tu sei buona e facile al perdono, lo so; ma le mie non sono colpe che si cancellino col pentimento, solo si espiano, ed io le ho duramente espiate.

«Il giorno che dovei rinunciare al mio bel sogno di correre a te, di venirti a dire: «Donnina, io ho trovato un padre che mi ama e che amo, un padre che sarà il tuo, quando tu sarai mia; io studierò, la larva dei miei sonni si farà persona, diventerò uomo, avrò una professione e basterò col lavoro e coll'amore a farti felice!» oh! tu non immagini quant'io soffrissi quel giorno.

«La mia colpa, ingigantita dalla freddezza che ogni giorno mi si faceva meglio palese nel cuore del mio nuovo padre, mi disse che io era indegno di te, che non dovevo più pensare a te, che coll'avere abbandonato la mia miseria io aveva perduto il diritto alla felicità che doveva andarle compagna. E poi con qual cuore rivederti per ingannarti, o per dirti la mia desolazione? E avresti tu compreso altro fuor che io aveva, volontariamente, posto una barriera tra te e me, che più non mi appartenevo, che la nostra felicità, dove pure tu me ne credessi ancora degno, dipendeva dalla volontà d'un altro uomo, il quale si faceva chiamare mio padre?

«Pensai che fosse meglio uccidere in germe l'affetto deposto nel tuo cuore; volli venire a dirti: non ti amo più, amane un altro. — Un altro!... Non ne ebbi forza.

«Poi mi venne un amaro pensiero.

«Forse, dicevo a me stesso, Donnina mi dimenticherà davvero: tra l'aspettare molti anni per esser mia ed il divenir sposa più presto, sceglierà d'amare un altro.

«Frattanto il signor Fulgenzio mi dava maestri, dai quali appresi rapidamente, con una specie di febbre continua che mi rendeva meno amara la nuova condizione. Pensando di potere collo studio farmi un avvenire, e, padrone un giorno di me stesso, chiamar te a dividerlo, studiavo senza riposo; mi pareva come se ogni nuova cognizione mi avvicinasse a te, mi desse un nuovo diritto alla felicità pensata di nostro capo ad S... nel praticello dietro la chiesuola.

«Presto fui in grado di presentarmi ad alcuni esami, ed un anno dopo a nuovi esami, e finalmente, a 19 anni compiuti, nell'università per istudiare medicina — fra quattro mesi sarò dottore!

«Ora che il mio lungo disegno sta per aver compimento e la mia ambizione è presso ad essere soddisfatta, ora che io so come il tuo cuore sia rimasto mio, forse la tua stima mi manca, la mia stima...

«Volli indugiare per poterti dire: «io sono padrone di me stesso, ho uno stato, posso darti una onorata miseria per ora, l'agiatazza poi; eccoti la mia mano, cancelliamo il passato.»

«Oggi non posso più tacere, sai tutto; ma sappi anche, qualunque sia la sentenza che uscirà dal tuo labbro, che io voglio rimanere per te sempre, come fui sempre

«OGNISSANTI.»

Donnina ha proferito le ultime parole della lettera lentamente, e si è arrestata a scandere le sillabe del nome del suo fidanzato come per separarsene più tardi... poi volge uno sguardo alla vecchia. In quello sguardo è la sicurezza di sè, d'Ognissanti, dell'avvenire, ed è una tacita domanda a cui mamma Teresa è sollecita a rispondere:

— È vero, dice ella accarezzando severamente, con un garbo tutto suo, la testa della fanciulla, è vero; comincio a credere anch'io che Ognissanti sia un bravo figliuolo, comincio a crederlo... e se non ti basta... lo credo... ne sono convinta... Non ti basta ancora? Vuoi che gli domandi scusa d'aver sospettato di lui? Te lo leggo in cuore il tuo trionfo; ma tu sbagli di grosso perchè il tuo trionfo è pure il mio; avrei dato un paio di dozzine di giorni, dei pochi che mi rimangono, per vedere smentiti i miei sospetti. Ma tu dirai che mamma Teresa sa solo brontolare e non ci vede chiaro. E se fosse anche?... Per chi non ci vede chiaro, il meno male è il non fidarsi mai alle apparenze. Dici di no tu?

E siccome Donnina le bacia il volto rugoso senza rispondere, tutta la stizza della vecchia si rivolge al signor maestro. Ma costui, dacchè la moglie ha preso a parlare, s'è dato a fregare le mani sulle ginocchia, infervorandosi vie più e facendo festa ai fantasmi del pensiero.

Poco stante la terribile mamma si abbandona anch'essa alle meditazioni, che le fanno fare, senza avvedersene, la smorfia d'un sorriso bonario...

Quando dopo brev'ora escono entrambi ad un tempo da quel muto fantasticare, rompono insieme il silenzio con una parola:

«E Donnina?»

Donnina non è più nella stanza, se n'è andata di soppiatto, ha salito le scale e si è raccolta nella sua cameretta... A che fare?

— Io lo so che cosa è andata a fare! dice maestro Ciro.

— E anch'io lo so! Bella cosa!

Sappia chi nol sapesse che Donnina si è ritirata per rileggere la lettera del suo Ognissanti, e che il signor maestro aveva indovinato davvero. Quanto a mamma Teresa, la presuntuosa si vantava, e maestro Ciro lo sapeva benissimo. Forse che la cara dolcezza di rileggere in segreto una lettera, può essere compresa da chi, come la terribile mamma, non aveva voluto addimesticarsi mai coll'alfabeto?...

Maestro Ciro è pronto a giurare di no.

XX.

CHI FOSSE IL SIGNOR MAURIZIO.

Chi legge si compiaccia di fare più intima conoscenza col signor Maurizio, personaggio molto chiuso, molto taciturno, ma che ha anch'esso il suo romanzo intimo a dire, sol che se ne porga occasione. Così almeno assicurano i curiosi, razza di affamati, la quale ha questo innocentissimo privilegio di vedere un palazzo incantato quando non vede nulla, e divide sapientemente il prossimo in due bocconi: quelli che hanno un segreto da nascondere e quelli che non l'hanno più.

Se è vero che il signor Maurizio lo abbia ancora, è un miracolo genuino, perchè fino a questo giorno furono poste in giro parecchie dozzine di segreti, e tutti sottratti, per quanto si diceva, allo scrigno del letterato.

Codesto signore appartiene solo da quindici anni al suo prossimo: prima nessuno si occupava dei fatti suoi, nemmeno la portinaia (perchè abitava una casa che non si poteva concedere questo lusso), nemmeno i vicini, creature occupatissime delle miserie della terra, sebbene paressero aver scelto di starsene vicino al cielo. Era allora un bel x, abbandonato intero alle proprie meditazioni; ma l'algebra della vita non gli pareva nè amara nè penosa, perciò solo che egli la condiva col rimario, con raggi economici di luna al davanzale della finestra, con civetterie di stelle, e, quando il cielo era a nugoli, con una buona e schietta imprecazione in versi sciolti, atta a sbarazzare il suo cielo di poeta ed a serenargli la coscienza. Certo più erano le volte che il vate convitava a lauto banchetto la musa, di quelle in cui l'uomo si trovasse ad un vero e proprio desinare; i suoi pranzi e le

sue cene avevano quasi sempre l'aria di mutilati, i quali portassero melanconicamente il loro battesimo pomposo; ma se ad un disgraziato mancano due braccia e due gambe, al rimanente si dà tuttavia il nome di uomo; così era di quei pranzi o di quelle cene, le cui gambe e braccia Maurizio non aveva visto da tempo immemorabile.

Per queste prove d'astinenza s'impoveriscono le vene, tranne la poetica, la quale invece si fa torrente.

Tutto ciò per dire come la lirica occupasse onoratamente la prima parte della vita di Maurizio. Che sarebbe stato di lui, se avesse tirato innanzi a passo di rimario, nessuno può dire, ma a tutti è lecito immaginare. Volle fortuna che la musa, in un momento di buon umore, lo consigliasse a scrivere in prosa; fu un'apostasia, non dico di no, ma un'apostasia magnificamente riuscita, rispetto alla gloria ed al ventricolo, perchè mentre parecchie migliaia di versi editi ed inediti non gli avevano dato nè un briciolo di gloria, nè una briciola di pane, un paio di articoletti fatti coll'amarezza dell'apostata, il quale si vendica del proprio delitto, gli schiusero la porta del piano terreno d'uno dei più grandiosi e quotidiani edificii di carta del suo tempo.

Fu una specie di trionfo, e fornì l'argomento a mille dicerie; Maurizio diveniva di moda, si sentiva accarezzato, lodato, adulato, gli piovevano nuove amicizie ogni giorno, gli fioccavano le strette di mano, e non udiva se non ripetere: «ho letto il tuo ultimo articolo!» Questa frase, accompagnata da un punto d'esclamazione, compendia tutta la sua vita, compresa fra due articoli. Una metà della settimana era spesa a raccogliere il frutto dell'*ultimo*, l'altra metà a preparare il *prossimo*. Ad un'anima della tempra di Maurizio non poteva bastare.

Veramente non si è detto ancora di che tempra fosse l'animo di Maurizio. Giudichi il lettore da questo, divenuto notorio, che quando il giornalista era crisalide, cioè poeta, viveva negli stenti di una misera pensione pagatagli da uno zio milionario, il quale si era posto in capo di far del suo unico nipote un console od un senatore. La fedeltà alla musa costava dunque a Maurizio gli agi della vita, ed

anche ora che la crisalide era divenuta farfalla, cioè giornalista, l'apostolato della critica gli costava forse ancora gli agi della vita, ed indubitabilmente un consolato.

Quell'aureola di vittima aveva contribuito la sua buona parte al rumore che si era fatto intorno a Maurizio; ma, ripeto, l'anima di lui non se ne accontentava. Aver inseguito per tanti anni i fantasmi di una gloria poetico-letteraria, per starsene pago ad una fuggitiva nomea comprata a prezzo di un po' di spirito e di molta maldicenza, gli pareva cosa bassa. Comprendevo benissimo essere il pubblico così fatto che, mentre fa buon viso alle inezie che punzecchiano, lascia dimenticato in un canto tutto ciò che approfondisce e pensa: ma, sazio del plauso della folla, volle il plauso degli eletti, invece di una gloriuzza volle una superba gloria tanto fatta.

Affettò primo egli stesso di disprezzare le proprie chiacchiere settimanali, e non col falso disprezzo di chi vuol collocare i capitali ad interesse più alto, ma con un disprezzo vero e profondo. «Ho letto il tuo ultimo articolo.» «Sciocchezze! rispondeva, sto preparando un altro lavoro!» «Che lavoro?» «Uno studio sui filosofi della rivoluzione francese.» «Ah!»

Non ci volle altro. È possibile leggere ancora, e trovar belle, le scritture d'uno che premediti uno studio sui filosofi della rivoluzione francese? Le teste meglio pettinate del caffè... furono le prime ad accorgersi come da qualche tempo la stella di Maurizio andasse declinando, ed il suo spirito si esaurisse, e perdesse egli i denti della satira. Ciò in parte era vero; sbollite le prime collere contro la società, Maurizio cedette alla propria natura e ridivenne benigno; e poi la sua fierezza si ribellava a questo scendere in piazza collo staffile, ed occuparsi delle persone col dispetto, colle ire e colle ironie che non devono ispirare se non le cose e le istituzioni; era troppo superbo per mordere dalla sua cuccia alle gambe degli inermi; non lasciò la cuccia perchè vi trovava un po' di pane, ma lasciò di mordere, raddolcì l'amaro della critica; dimenticò sè stesso nello scrivere, per ricordarsi solo delle cose di cui doveva parlare; non forzò gli argomenti ad atteggiarsi come piedestalli, per

mettervisi in mostra, come aveva fatto per lo innanzi; invece del getto continuo di spirito, di cui frodava i lettori, provò a dar loro idee vere e pensate. Fu come lo sfasciarsi d'un idolo.

Rientrò nell'ombra, per escirne periodicamente visto da pochi; l'oscurità non lo sbigottì, se ne compiacque, e si adoperò a farsi più oscuro, sostituendo al proprio nome, a' piedi dei suoi articoli, due iniziali. Parevagli che il disdegno interno dovesse così apparire al di fuori; fu invece accusato di debolezza, e divenne l'esempio di un critico col cilicio e coll'amor del prossimo. A poco a poco nessuno ricordò che sotto le iniziali di Maurizio era Maurizio. Egli poteva dire, a confortarsi, che fuor delle mura, lontano, questo incognito era un beneficio; che il nascondere la persona dà maggior autorità alla parola, che gli dèi della commedia parlano dietro le quinte; ma nemmeno di questa commedia si dava pensiero, solo gli premeva lo studio sui filosofi che prepararono la rivoluzione francese. Gli bisognarono parecchi anni di vita oscura per compiere questo lavoro; quando lo diede alle stampe non ne ricavò un centesimo, nè una lode.

Per tutti questi contrasti inselvaticò, divenne intrattabile; passava come uno spettro; quando s'imbatteva in uno degli antichi ammiratori, scantonava ad una svolta di via o fissava ostinatamente un punto dello spazio. Allora meditò una magnifica vendetta degli uomini che non lo comprendevano, intinse la penna nel fiele che gli aveva dato i primi allori, lanciò una mezza dozzina di saette, infine rovesciò la faretra ed uscì ringhioso per sempre dalla sua appendice. Fu un momentaneo sgomento, poi una generale risata. I curiosi, di quanto si passava nel cervello e nel cuore del vecchio idolo non sapevano nulla di nulla. Erano stati d'accordo in dire che Maurizio aveva un segreto. Quale? ne bisbigliarono dieci; poi tacquero; ora finalmente vedevano chiaro; il segreto di Maurizio era che gli aveva dato volta il cervello!

E non averci pensato prima! quando si dice!...

Pochi mesi dopo questa catastrofe, lo zio milionario se n'andò *ab intestato* all'altro mondo, senza potersi tirar dietro i milioni che non

aveva, e che toccarono, per eredità legittima, al nipote.

Il disgraziato Maurizio, a forza di prefiggere a scopo della sua vita l'ambizione letteraria, era venuto a disprezzare sinceramente il denaro, che vedeva così di rado; trovatosi di botto quasi ricco, sulle prime fu sbigottito; poi si ricordò di aver pensato e scritto che il denaro fa le gran cose del mondo e gli parve il portinaio del tempio della gloria non aspettasse se non la prima manciata di scudi per spalancargli l'uscio a due battenti. Tutti gli antichi sogni ambiziosi risorsero; pensò il cerchio dei vecchi e dei nuovi ammiratori fatto più compatto intorno a sè, ed il proprio disprezzo superbo circondato dalla invidia, ed il suo nome portato lontano sulle ali della fama. Gli si forniva un'occasione di far chiaro ai nulli carichi d'oro il disprezzo, mostrando come del suo proprio oro egli facesse poco conto. Comparve nelle brigate, nei caffè, al *club*, nei teatri, nelle sale da biliardo. In pochi giorni ebbe amici, ammiratori, scimmie dei suoi modi, delle sue vesti, gente che s'informava del suo sarto e della sua stiratrice. Di lettere nessuno gli fiata. Il mondo pensava che il meglio di Maurizio fosse il suo borsello.

A poco a poco prese l'abito elegante. Il suo quartierino da scapolo fu il ritrovo dei più leggiadri bellimbusti; vi si dissero le più gaie maldicenze, vi si sturarono le migliori bottiglie di sciampagna, vi si fecero le cose più matte e più di buon gusto. Se la gloria gli rimaneva chiusa, la nomea gli ritornava incontro a tiro da quattro.

I milioni di Maurizio divennero proverbiali.

Ma la fama di milionario costa cara, specie se non si hanno i milioni.

Maurizio, sprezzante della sua nuova fortuna, non volle però lasciarsela ghermire dallo scialacquo. Egli non diceva più a sè stesso l'ingegno esser tutto nel mondo, nè tutto essere il denaro, ma che il meglio è il piacere, e che a prolungarlo gli bisognava porre un argine alle spese. Lo fece senza curarsi di quanto il mondo avesse a dire e con maggior fortuna che non pensasse; nessuno ne malignò; la sua riputazione di milionario si trovò essere così solidamente fabbricata, che i cenci stessi non l'avrebbero demolita; i suoi nuovi modi parvero

frutto di balzano umore; la sua parsimonia sazieta'. Vero è che questa parsimonia era ancora la lauta vita colle sue orgie e coi suoi bagliori, e che in fondo aveva solo mutato l'andatura, ma la meta era la stessa, la rovina. Di questo però non si dava pensiero; si proponeva d'arrestarsi in tempo; dove? quando? non sapeva. Era avido di piaceri; pareva volersi stordire da qualche segreto tarlo; anelava ad ebbrezze ogni volta nuove; sentiva, soddisfatti, riardere con altro fuoco gli stessi desideri; in fondo era il vuoto ed un indefinito sgomento di sè. Lo sbigottiva la vacuità della sua vita, l'avvenire diverso tanto da quello che aveva sognato. In tutto il suo stato d'oggi, qual parte aveva la propria volontà, qual parte il proprio ingegno, a cui aveva tutto immolato? La sua stessa agiatezza gli era uggiosa; portava sulla fronte il marchio del sacerdozio fallito; era un disertore che la fortuna aveva comprato co' suoi favori.

Un giorno si avvide che invecchiava, e che nel suo cuore era un posto vacante per un amor di donna. Qual donna amare? Non importa quale; gli bisognava una donna che non si potesse comprare, un affetto che non avesse origine dal suo denaro; qualche cosa di veramente suo, ad accarezzare il proprio egoismo e la propria superbia. Lasciò le orgie, dicendo agli amici essere stanco dei vezzi noleggiati dalle belle, ed alle belle esser sazio degli affetti imprestati dagli amici; — le belle e gli amici sentenziarono: «Maurizio è colpevole d'innamoramento.»

Non era ancora vero. Alcuni mesi dopo, Serena fece la sua apparizione in Milano. Fu un avvenimento. Non parlò più se non della sua bellezza sovrumana, del suo lusso, del suo passato, delle sue ricchezze; le si diedero in prestito altri milioni, come a Maurizio; le si compose un romanzo molto intricato.

Maurizio cercò ed ottenne *la fortuna d'esserle presentato*, e tanto s'accostò alla fiamma di quei due occhioni, che vi ritrovò — miracolo nuovo — le proprie alucce di poeta, ed uscì in un madrigale che fece il giro del mondo elegante in ventiquatt'ore. Allora chi aveva accusato Maurizio di innamoramento, lo rimandò assolto, non so con quanta logica.

I mille adoratori della nuova divinità, apparsa nell'Olimpo molto pagano della ricca borghesia, non badarono nemmeno all'autore del madrigale, il quale non dava ombra a chicchessia coll'insistenza simmetrica del suo culto e colle quotidiane intercessioni. Il segreto di Maurizio stette nell'ombra, immolato sull'altare del segreto di Serena.

Costei non rimase lungamente come era apparsa; era vedova, sola, senza amanti conosciuti, circondata da vecchi e nuovi tentatori; chi era penetrato nel suo tempio, vi aveva visto gli arredi del culto proprio d'una divinità ricca e superba; tutto ciò è qualche cosa, poniamo anche sia molto; ma non è una *posizione* chiara e definita. Si discuteva, si almanaccava, ma in questo almeno si era d'accordo, che il mistero avviluppava tutta la bella figura di Serena, come il fondo nero d'un quadro, da cui esce più fascinatrice la superba bellezza d'una venere fiamminga. Con questa sola differenza, che la bella incognita aveva tutto delle veneri e nulla di fiammingo.

Non si andò fino a darle il carattere di avventuriera, ma si aggiunsero colla fantasia i casi più bizzarri al suo romanzo ipotetico; taluno più accorto ritirò nello scrigno i milioni concessi al primo apparire di lei. Si sa che nel mondo vi ha della brava gente, avara fino allo scrupolo dei proprii milioni.

A Maurizio non si pose mente gran fatto. Era suo desiderio vivere ignorato da tutti, noto a lei sola, ed alimentare nel proprio segreto la nuova fiamma, scaldarsi a quel fuoco insolito, rinascere alla nuova vita. Ambizione, gloria, ricchezze, piaceri — vecchio mondo in rovina, l'amore — ecco la vera vita, ecco l'avvenire, e gli sorrideva sulle labbra di Serena.

Quest'ultima frase non vuol essere presa se non come una figura della rettorica innamorata di Maurizio; il vero è che Serena non fu con altri tanto severa quanto fu con Maurizio, il quale fra tutti era il solo devoto e sincero. Arti di bella capricciosa? Bisognò che Maurizio se lo dicesse almeno dieci volte il giorno per non impazzire. Per lui non esisteva se non Serena, quel volto candido come l'alabastro, quegli occhioni di fuoco, quei capelli nerissimi; scopo della sua vita

fu giungere al tesoro chiuso in quel magnifico scrigno di donna — al cuore.

Quando ebbe la certezza che il magnifico scrigno era vuoto, ch'egli aveva affidato ad una vana sembianza tutti i suoi affetti, che quella suprema bellezza era da vendere al miglior offerente, che tutto quel lusso di forme apparteneva di diritto a chi lo avesse coperto con lusso maggiore di vesti e di gioielli, che il proprio amore era sprezzato, la nobiltà delle sue intenzioni quasi derisa, fu la fierezza dell'anima il medico della profonda ferita del cuore; si armò di disprezzo disposto ad entrare coraggiosamente in convalescenza.

Ma il disprezzo, che talvolta è forza, si ritorce di frequente contro chi l'adopera; uno che disprezzasse sinceramente tutto quanto lo circonda, finirebbe, di necessità, col disprezzare sè stesso.

Uscito dal primo impeto, Maurizio non poté tanto disprezzare Serena che non disprezzasse il mondo, nè tanto il mondo, da dimenticare come egli ne facesse parte.

Per la prima volta vide nelle veglie tormentose delle sue ultime febbri tutto sè stesso, la povertà dei desiderii seminati e la miseria del raccolto. Amore, piaceri, ambizioni, ogni cosa fa fatta spregevole o vana, e disistimabile tutto e sè stesso nell'immensa disistima del mondo.

Ad una di queste lunghe notti nevose era succeduta un'alba povera di luce, ed all'alba un mezzodì che pareva un tramonto, quando Maurizio, rizzandosi sui gomiti nel tormentoso letto, gettò alle proprie sembianze, riflesse da uno specchio, queste parole che gli venivano in mente per la prima volta: «stupido! il denaro fa tutto; puoi tu darmi un milioncino?»

L'altro non rispose, ed il servitore bussò colla nocca del dito alla porta.

Recava una lettera.

Quella lettera diceva così:

«*Signore,*

«Sul punto di lasciare Milano, per non tornarvi forse mai più, sento il dovere di rivolgervi una parola di ringraziamento e di addio. Non mi importa di ciò che dirà il mondo, ma di quanto potrete pensare voi sono gelosa. La proposta sincera che mi avete fatto vi dà il diritto di giudicarmi severamente. Fatelo; la mia colpa non trovi pietà nel vostro cuore, io lo merito. Ma sappiate almeno che sotto la maschera del cinismo e dell'indifferenza era il rossore della vergogna, e che il cumulo di menzogne, di cui feci pompa con voi, nascondeva un cuore. Non oso stringere la mano che mi avete offerto. Siate felice.

«SERENA».

XXI.

IL SECONDO COLLOQUIO DI MAURIZIO E SERENA.

Mezz'ora dopo Maurizio attendeva nel leggiadro salotto di Serena, col cuore agitato da una febbre più gagliarda di tutte le precedenti, colle mani contratte come per forzare la propria impazienza a contenersi.

Era uscito da casa ed aveva fatto la strada senza pensieri, o piuttosto con un solo pensiero, che era insieme un delirio: «ella mi ama!»

Tutte le idee si confondevano in quest'una: dubbii, ansie, paure, affannose notti, più nulla, nebbia ogni cosa; egli aveva l'occhio ad un raggio di sole: «ella mi ama!»

Pensava egli a quanto stava per fare, a ciò che stava per dire? Che importava? Si sentiva più grande degli avvenimenti, gigante quanto era il fascino di queste parole: «ella mi ama!»

Serena si fe' molto aspettare.

Quando apparve nel vano della porta, come una cara visione lungamente evocata, Maurizio mandò un piccolo grido e fece un passo incontro ad essa; ma la bella volse il capo a sbarazzare lo strascico della serica veste, che si era molto opportunamente impigliata nello stretto passo, e Maurizio si sentì inchiodato al suolo.

Nel sorriso, nella fredda e cerimoniosa disinvoltura di Serena, non era proprio nulla della donna innamorata; invano, su quel pallido volto incantevolmente bello, Maurizio si adoperava a leggere una sillaba di ciò che aveva creduto di leggere nella preziosa lettera... proprio nulla!

Serena fe' cenno al visitatore di sedere, e sedette ella stessa. Maurizio si lasciò cadere sopra uno dei seggioloni azzurri a frange d'oro, senza poter profferire parola e non distaccando gli occhi dalla bella indolente.

— Vi ho scritto, fu la prima a dire Serena.

— E per questo io sono qui, rispose Maurizio con voce commossa. Se quanto siete bella, voi siete generosa, dovete abbreviare la tortura che provo, promettermi d'esser schietta come sono io.

— Non vi comprendo, rispose freddamente Serena.

— Mi comprendete; lo leggo nel vostro cuore che mi comprendete; promettetemi di essere sincera.

— Prometto, disse Serena con lieve atto dispettoso; non abuserete, immagino, della fiducia che ho riposto in voi e della volontaria parte di rea da me scelta, per farmi un interrogatorio. Volete essere mio giudice? Ve ne ho concesso il diritto, aspettate però che io sia lontana.

— Voglio essere il mio giudice, riprese a dire Maurizio con un accento pacato e grave che dava solennità alle sue parole, e socchiudendo gli occhi profondi, come per nasconderne il lampo: voglio essere il mio giudice; mi sta dinanzi agli occhi un superbo fantasma, ho fatto un sogno audace; se vero è quel sogno, voi mi amate.

Serena, sorrise in singolare maniera, e rispose scherzosamente: «Svegliatevi.»

— Non ancora, soggiunse Maurizio trattenendo invano l'impeto della passione; non ancora. Non prima d'avervi detto che il vostro amore mi è necessario, che è il mio delirio, tutta la mia vita. Non prima d'avervi detto che le cento ambizioni meschine per cui è passato il mio cuore hanno ora fatto una grande ambizione: essere amato da voi; che l'amor vostro sarebbe ad un tempo una pietà, che nessuno potrete mai rendere tanto felice con una parola quanto me. Ora dite, ho io sognato scioccamente, od è vero che mi amate?

«Svegliatevi» ripeté Serena collo stesso accento, collo stesso atto, collo stesso sorriso.

E siccome Maurizio la guardava fisso in volto tentando di cogliere nelle sembianze di lei una mentita alle parole, soggiunse:

— Vi ho dato la mia stima, vi ho dato la mia fiducia, e sono cose che vengono dal cuore; potrei darvi un effimero affetto, e sarebbe capriccio, dire d'amarvi e sarebbe menzogna. Uscite dal vostro inganno. Risalendo il mio passato non trovo per gran tratto di via una parola schietta come la vostra, un'offerta generosa come la vostra, un cuore più nobile del vostro — ecco perchè mi duole d'essere da voi creduta più trista di quello che sono — ed ecco perchè vi ho scritto. Mi sentivo disprezzata e volevo essere rammentata senza maggior disprezzo domani... Non credevo di rivedervi...

— Sentite, interruppe Maurizio pigliando con audacia lontanissima dalla impertinenza la mano della bella, io ho gli anni in cui le passioni sono fatali, e nondimeno mi rimarrebbe tanta forza da soffocarle se le credessi ignobili: sentite, io non chieggo del vostro passato, io non voglio guardare in un tempo che non mi appartiene; qualunque sia la colpa da cui siete uscita così bella e così forte, io so già che è una sciagura. Ebbene, sappiatelo; ho anch'io una colpa, e la nascondo anch'io invano a me stesso; accettate di divenire mia moglie, farete una generosa azione, e mi aiuterete ad espiare e riparare il passato. Devo dire di più?

— No, ve ne scongiuro.

Serena non disse altro, pareva le mancassero le parole ad una folla d'idee e di sentimenti.

Maurizio approfittò di quell'istante di debolezza e soggiunse:

— Non sono ricco, lo sapete, pure mi rimane tanto da vivere in un'onesta oscurità; non mi dite che vi piace il lusso, che amate la pompa e gli agi d'una splendida esistenza; ho potuto crederlo un istante, ma oggi non la crederei.

— Avreste torto, osservò Serena ritrovando un'uscita al suo imbarazzo.

Maurizio non l'udì.

— Andremo lungi da Milano, andremo dove vorrete, il mondo è vasto ed offre mille nascondigli alla vera felicità; ne cercheremo uno insieme.

Dicendo queste parole, il volto severo di Maurizio brillava di una luce insolita, e la voce gli tremava come per affanno. Serena rimaneva impassibile; od almeno se ne dava l'aria.

— È inutile, diss'ella, questa bella cornice non si adatta a me; vi pare che, se anche potessi accettare di divenir vostra, l'ombra mi accontenterebbe? Mi crediate o no, io amo la luce, tutti mi dicono che sono bella, ed a forza di sentirlo dire mi piace crederlo; finchè ciò dura bisogna metterlo in mostra; è la mia parte.

— Cessate, interruppe Maurizio con dolcezza pietosa, cessate; io vi leggo in cuore che non sentite una parola di quanto dite per guarirmi. Non sono un ammalato che risani; finchè durerà la mia speranza sarò un audace sognatore, se risvegliandomi non sarò nelle vostre braccia, impazzirò.

Serena si rizzò in piedi e guardò intorno a sè come sgomentata, poi si fece presso a Maurizio col volto in fiamme.

— È vero, sì, è vero, io vi ho ingannato, io vi amo!

E gettandogli senza ritegno le braccia al collo, ruppe in un singhiozzo le ultime parole.

Quell'atto fu così repentino, che Maurizio rimase un istante trasognato. Uscendo dal suo torpore, sentendosi fra le braccia il bel corpo di Serena, e sul volto l'alito della sua bocca ed i ricci dei suoi capelli, e sul cuore il martellare affrettato di quel cuore rimasto fino allora un mistero, diè un grido.

— Oh! ch'io non impazzisca ora per l'immensa gioia!

— Tacete, per pietà; tacete! mormorò la bella, e chiuse colla mano tremante la bocca di Maurizio.

In quell'atto, in quella sconfinata ebbrezza dei sensi, Maurizio non si sentiva più uomo; nascose il capo nell'onda dei ricci della bella, ne baciò le labbra, le guance, la fronte, e tacque. Quanta parte pigliava Serena a quella muta frenesia?

A poco a poco l'ansia del suo petto si quietò, cessò l'affanno, e fu essa la prima a sciogliersi dolcemente da quell'amplesso.

— Se voi mi amate, mormorò Maurizio prolungando quanto poteva la sua felicità, se voi mi amate siate mia.

Serena non rispose, allontanò per l'ultima volta la mano che le cingeva il corpo e riuscì a sedersi sopra un seggiolone. Aveva ripreso tutto l'imperio di sè medesima, era ancora la bella indolente di prima. Quanto a Maurizio, nell'atto d'uno a cui sia stato tolto dalle mani un tesoro, la guardava con occhi sbigottiti, avendo l'aria di non credere alla sua felicità di poc'anzi.

— Siate mia, insistette Maurizio facendosi più presso: ho guardato nel mio avvenire ed ho visto che non mi riserba altra felicità se non l'amarvi; siate voi dunque tutto il mio avvenire, siate mia.

Maurizio nel dire queste parole aveva riguadagnato un po' della sua consueta fermezza; pregava, ma come un superbo.

— Sono vostra, rispose Serena con semplicità; la parola che mi è uscita dal labbro mi fa vostra. Le donne mie pari quando hanno detto di amare sono fortezze smantellate; l'amore è la parola d'ordine. Sono vostra...

Quelle parole trattennero Maurizio, il quale sulle prime aveva dato loro un altro significato. Ciò che ora comprendeva era tanto inverisimile, che stentava a darvi fede. Nulla rispose, ma l'atto quasi pauroso con cui si ritrasse, ed il fiero modo con cui sollevò la fronte, dissero chiaro il suo pensiero.

Serena lo guardava senza sbigottimento.

— Mi avete detto di stimarmi, prese poi a dire Maurizio con voce grave, mi avete ingannato. Io non sono venuto per farvi ingiuria; è un'altra maniera d'amore quella che vi chieggo.

— Non ne ho altra, rispose Serena.

Maurizio non udì.

— Non parlo alla donna che ha l'incenso di tutti, parlo a quella che ha il mio cuore. Il passato qualunque sia non è cosa mia; non voglio di voi altro che voi sola! A me basta sapermi amato e sapervi moglie virtuosa. Non potete voi divenirlo?

— Non posso, rispose Serena senza esitare, non posso. La colpa è la mia sorte, la porto meco, non mi abbandona, non può abbandonarmi mai... nè con voi, nè con altri...

— Mi basta, mormorò Maurizio, mi basta.

Ma non era vero; non gli poteva bastare; lottava dentro di sè tra la superbia e l'amore, e si guardava intorno con occhio smarrito.

Serena vide quello sguardo e n'ebbe paura, e fu di nuovo in piedi d'un balzo, ma invece di farsi presso a Maurizio, rimase immobile, severa, quasi minacciosa, cogli occhi fissi all'uscio della sua camera.

Maurizio si volse, e vide nella stessa cornice, dove poc'anzi gli era apparsa la soave figura di Serena, un uomo tozzo, una faccia spartita per metà dal sorriso d'una bocca enorme, due occhioni da coniglio sotto una piccola fronte, e tutto ciò in atto tra l'umile ed il beffardo.

Allo sguardo di Serena il banchiere Redi si ripiegò sopra sè stesso e scomparve; e Maurizio, a cui l'ingrata apparizione apriva gli occhi, non seppe resistere al primo istinto della propria superbia, s'inclinò lievemente e fece atto di uscire.

Non aveva mosso un passo, e già era pentito, e voleva rimanere; ma Serena non fe' cenno, non disse parola per trattenerlo, ed il disgraziato si trovò fuori dell'uscio senza avvedersi che gli sanguinava il cuore.

Questa volta Serena non pianse, non uscì in singhiozzi, ma rimase in piedi immobile gran tratto dopo che Maurizio fu lontano.

Quando si risovvenne del banchiere Redi, entrò nella propria camera che trovò deserta; il prudente milionario se n'era andato.

Ma aveva lasciato di sè il profumo, un irresistibile olezzo di bergamotto che doveva guidare la fantasia più ritrosa dietro i suoi passi. Forse per resistere più coraggiosamente alla tentazione, Serena ritornò nel salotto e sedette dove sedeva poc'anzi, e fissò l'occhio dove poc'anzi era Maurizio, e così rimase a lungo.

Fu tolta, o piuttosto non fu tolta, ai suoi pensieri, da un servitore che recava un bigliettino olezzante di mammola. Serena riconobbe l'essenza favorita del vago luogotenente delle guide, e si lasciò cadere di mano il pistolotto senza degnarlo d'uno sguardo.

Così passava il tempo; già la luce invernale incominciava ad affievolirsi; a poco a poco si abbrunarono successivamente le quattro virtù delle pareti, i ninnoli di bronzo ed i mobili di palissandro, poi l'azzurro delle stoffe e le dorature, e da ultimo non rimasero di quell'allegre comitiva di colori, altro che i bianchi amorini di stucco appesi alla vòlta a ghirlande della propria natura.

Serena fantasticava sempre, fissando la candida boccia d'una lampada; e solo quando l'ebbe perduta di vista, perchè l'ultimo tizzo si spense nel caminetto, solo allora si avvide dell'oscurità e del freddo.

Chiamò; due minuti dopo tutti i colori, che si erano sottratti ad uno ad uno e come di nascosto, riapparvero in frotta a far festa al lame giocondo della lampada ed alle fiammate allegre del focolare.

Ecco: le frange d'oro dei mobili e gli stipiti dorati si rimandano i riflessi, ogni spigolo sfoggia la sua pennellata di splendore, le quattro virtù sembrano sorridere agli amorini, e gli amorini ricominciano più allegramente che mai le loro tentazioni sul capo delle quattro virtù.

È il buon momento.

Il cugino Ferdinando, l'amabile luogotenente delle guide, domanda d'esser ricevuto.

La bella pensosa rialza il capo e fa un cenno sbadato che si può tradurre: «venga.»

E l'amabile luogotenente viene, colle gambe sparate, colla sciabola sotto il braccio, come un eroe che muove alla conquista. Deh! se la vittoria ha un minuzzolo di cervello non tardi a buttarglisi nelle braccia.

XXII.

IL LUOGOTENENTE DELLE GUIDE TORNA ALLA CARICA.

Cuginetta, disse l'azzurro cavaliere, sono stato più volte al punto di credermi meno fortunato; dentro di me qualche cosa scommetteva che non mi avreste ricevuto. Il cuore ha vinto la posta; lasciate che vi ringrazi.

— Di che? rispose Serena, volgendo appena il capo dalla parte del nuovo venuto, senza però staccare gli occhi da un punto fisso che non era nella sala.

— Di aver aderito alla mia preghiera.

— Quale preghiera?

Il luogotenente parve sbigottito da quella ostinata distrazione.

— Non avete ricevuta la mia lettera?

— Mi pare di sì, ma non ho avuto tempo di leggerla.

E si volse senza affettazione; in aria di sincero pentimento, ricercò e mostrò sulla tavola, ancora intatta, l'odorosa missiva del galante guerriero; l'aspetto del quale è intraducibile colla penna; quello stentato sorriso, quella violenta contrazione dei muscoli della faccia per non fare il broncio, e quel dimenarsi per non parere sgominato, gli davano un'aria burlesca di vittima niente affatto rassegnata.

— Vi domando scusa, disse Serena ridendo forte, come se non potesse resistere all'impeto del suo umore giocondo; mi direte voi stesso che cosa contiene questa lettera, caro cugino.

Il cugino Ferdinando aveva perduta la testa, ed infilò due spropositi uno in coda all'altro. Il primo sproposito fu di non far eco alla gaia risata della bella, il secondo di rispondere pregando la bella di leggere ora il suo biglietto.

Il lettore avveduto non ha bisogno che gli si dica quanto magra figura faccia un innamorato, il quale assiste alla lettura della propria *dichiarazione d'amore*. Ma era proprio un innamorato, il luogotenente delle Guide? Questo non è certo, quanto è certo è che la sua lettera era una dichiarazione profumata, a bruciapelo.

Serena si arrese all'invito con molta grazia, spiegò la lettera, ne fiutò il profumo con un atto di lieve beffa, e lesse a voce alta, facendo scherzosamente tutte le fermate delle virgole e dei punti. Quell'omaggio all'ortografia del luogotenente fu ricevuto male, perchè, invece di esserne lusingato, il guerriero continuò a dimenarsi sulla seggiola non sapendo come tenersi.

Finita la lettura, la bella depose sbadatamente la missiva dove l'aveva presa e si rivolse al cugino:

— Dunque voi mi amate? Ne siete sicuro?

Il luogotenente, a sentire enunciato il suo tema, fece uno sforzo coraggioso per non darsi l'aria d'uno scolaretto, ed incominciò l'amplificazione così:

— Credetelo, cugina, ve ne prego. So tutte le idee che possono venirvi in mente, so che il passato sta contro di me per quella volgare opinione che non si ama due volte la stessa persona; potrei dirvi che non ho mai cessato di amarvi, ma sarò schietto; è vero, io ho potuto cessare d'amarvi; non so come, non so perchè; ed ora vi amo più della prima volta. Ho ritrovato in voi tutta la vostra bellezza che mi accese, e per giunta un fascino nuovo che m'incatena.

Il linguaggio del luogotenente era divenuto a poco a poco sicuro e determinato.

Serena lo lasciò dire senza interromperlo.

— Siete bella come non foste mai, tutti vi adorano, ed io sono geloso. Non voglio mascherare i miei sentimenti, attribuiteli voi a voi stessa, non a merito mio; ma se la schiettezza merita un premio, siate schietta anche voi con me, ditemi se vi pare proprio che non possiate amarmi mai.

— Mi pare proprio, rispose Serena.

Il cugino insisteva collo sguardo.

— Vi comprendo, disse la bella, con un leggiadro sorriso; voi stesso vi fate illusione sui vostri sentimenti; non volete ingannarmi perchè siete schietto e generoso, ma vi ingannate, perchè nessun uomo è padrone d'essere schietto e generoso con sè stesso. Credete di amarmi per le mie nuove bellezze, per un mio fascino nuovo; se poteste leggere dentro di voi come io vi leggo, vedreste che in me non amate più la donna, ma la cortigiana in voga.

— Cugina... disse l'uffiziale accostandosi.

— Cugino... ribattè la bella, fredda, ma senza collera, il vostro amore è un'impertinenza.

Il disgraziato amatore ammutolì.

— Domani lascio Milano, proseguì Serena, ridiventando la creatura indolente di prima.

— È dunque vero?

— Lo sapete?

— Si diceva al caffè; non ho voluto credere, e per questo vi ho scritto e sono venuto.

— E si diceva dove mi recherò?

— A Parigi.

— Sono meglio informati di me, perchè io stessa non lo so ancora. Non si diceva altro?

— Null'altro. Ebbene, vi scongiuro...

— Cugino, ci rimettete uno scongiuro; è deciso che io parta.

— Sola?

— No.

— E l'uomo che vi accompagna, lo amate?

Serena si strinse nelle spalle e non rispose.

— Sentite, riprese a dire il luogotenente dopo un breve ed affannoso silenzio; se una cosa vera è mai uscita dalle mie labbra, ve lo giuro sul mio onore, è questa, ch'io vi amo. Non vogliate vendicarvi di me, oppure vendicatevi meglio, ridatemi avaramente una briciola del passato, ridatemi...

— Io non mi do, interruppe Serena con tono indifferente, mi vendo.

— E il vostro compratore? rispose incollerito il cugino.

— Mi paga cara, e potrebbe comprare dieci mie pari; non vi fu detto il suo nome al caffè?

— Non mi fu detto, ma ora l'indovino; il banchiere Redi.

Serena non rispose.

— Lo ucciderò, disse il guerriero, mettendo il pugno sull'elsa della sciabola.

— Un milionario non si lascia uccidere; e poi, ucciso uno se ne trova un altro; non vorrete uccidere tutti i milionari, immagino. Cugino Ferdinando, ridiventate uomo di spirito, come siete sempre stato fino a questo momento.

E la bella, senza muoversi dall'indolente positura, fece un cenno di commiato al galante guerriero e sonò un campanello.

Un pezzo di servitore alto sei piedi apparve nel vano dell'uscio. Di mala voglia il luogotenente si rizzò, fece un lieve inchino, uscì.

E la bella continuò a fissare lungamente un punto immobile, che non era nel suo salotto.