

# **The Final Years of Dr. Albert Ellis**

## **And The Lessons for All of Us**

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Dr. Albert Ellis famously and often boasted that he would die in the saddle at age 110—right in the middle of a normal workday—preferably while teaching his beloved REBT theory and techniques to yet another fresh group of eager students. Doing the hard work necessary to reach one difficult goal after another was his specialty; but this was one that would elude him. He died peacefully at home at age 93 on July 24, 2007 of natural causes, after a serious and prolonged illness that made it necessary for him to spend his last 4 years more often than not bedridden, with most of the last year in the hospital or a nursing home. Most people would see that as a rather ordinary end to an extraordinary, long and profoundly distinguished life. But, there was nothing ordinary about Al (as he preferred everyone to call him). Furthermore, I believe he would have been the first person to tell you that his medical issues were not even close to being what bothered him the most at the end of his life. What haunted him more, was that for his last two years he was not permitted to continue doing much of the work he loved at the Institute he founded.

As CEO (executive director) of the Albert Ellis Institute (AEI) at the time, the buck stopped with me. Thus, I was the one who had to sign off on his work restrictions. However, I did not make the decision lightly or alone. It was made and agreed to by our entire senior clinical staff (some of whom had continuously worked next to Al at the Institute for as long as 30 years) and a majority of AEI's Board (with members whose involvement with Al and the Institute went back as far as 50 years). Al ferociously opposed the decision, and from that point on, he considered all of us involved in that decision to be his "enemies".

The best metaphor I can give for the actions we had to take is the one of being in the painful role of having to take the car keys away from an aging parent that still believes he or she can drive as safely as always. This is analogous to what my AEI colleagues and I had to do in order to protect the public and the long-standing reputation of Al and his beloved namesake Institute. The last thing that I would ever have wanted was to be among those ultimately responsible for taking Albert Ellis away from many of the aspects of the work he remained passionate about until his death and which by his own admission, defined him. He died denouncing the Institute he spent his life building into an internationally acclaimed training center for mental health professionals, along with many of those who Al had selected to serve it. That is the saddest part of this story.

Dr. Albert Ellis was a man I greatly admired for most of my career. (And I wasn't alone. Al consistently comes up in the top 10 on surveys by mental health professionals of the most influential members of the field ever. For example, in APA's survey, he ranked number 2---just under Carl Rogers and ahead of Sigmund Freud.) He was also one of my earliest mentors. When I was a masters' student, I once sent him a short letter with some questions about a paper I was writing for a personality theory class. Within a few days, he sent me back a six page single spaced letter he typed himself that not only answered my questions and critiqued my entire paper, but also began for me the cognitive behavioral framework that I have since used in the treatment and training I do, the books I write and even my career as a radio psychologist. Those of us who knew him well were aware that one of the secrets of Al's success-- aside from 16+ hour workdays and his sheer genius---was that nobody was too unimportant to get his immediate and undivided attention. This was an extremely admirable quality of his. Like many thousands of others, I went on to train at the Institute for Rational Emotive Therapy (as AEI was called in the 1970s.)

In the 1980s, at Al's request I started an affiliated training program in Philadelphia for professionals to obtain Primary and Advanced Certificates in REBT. Over 1000 psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and other mental health professionals in the tri-state Philadelphia

area participated by attending anything from a workshop or two to the entire certificate program—and this was before CE credits were even required in Pennsylvania for license renewal. In addition, Al and I did numerous workshops, panels and many other types of collaborations together over a 25-year period. We strongly endorsed each other's books and audio programs; and certainly considered each other good friends as well as major resources. He was also a frequent guest on my radio program.

However, aside from being one of AEI's long standing trainers and authors, I did not become involved in the affairs of the Institute until 2001. AEI was then experiencing some difficult transitional issues; and Al along with another board member asked me to join its Board. I was not at all eager (perhaps I had a premonition of what was to come), but agreed. The AEI Board consisted of a number of people---mostly professionals---from around the country who had all been handpicked at one time or another by Albert Ellis. We were reliable supporters of Al, the Institute and the work he/it did for as long as five decades. Understandably, Al had always been the dominant figure on the Board and in most aspects of Institute policy. This included its sizable and extremely dedicated professional and administrative staff (who had serious long-term careers there), as well as its fellows in training who see clients at AEI's moderate cost clinic (many of whom relocate for a year or two to New York from all over the world to train at the Institute).

In September 2003, the Board decided to make a management change; and Al asked me to become AEI's executive director. Initially, I was not interested for many reasons. I was quite busy with my own practice and business interests in Philadelphia. In addition, through my books and audio programs, I had developed my own niche and the last thing I wanted was to give up my two-block "dream commute" for anything that would take me to NYC on a regular basis. However, at Al's insistence and since there was no one else that the Board felt could step right in at the time and do the job in a pinch, I eventually agreed with the best of intentions to assume the role on a temporary and part time basis. Having been self-employed for practically my entire career and being keenly aware of the dynamics at AEI (from having been on the Board for 2 years at this point), I had one major condition: that I report directly to the Board, not to Al. Once this was established, I made a commitment to spend a limited amount of time each week in New York, in addition to being available by phone and email as needed.

As executive director, I focused initially on a wide variety of new initiatives designed to transition AEI to that inevitable next era when it would have to thrive without Albert Ellis. (Al was still the major draw as well as board president---the same as he had always been--- though his health was quickly deteriorating.) Al was not at this point involved in day-to-day operations. He spent most of his time in bed, cared for by private nurses 24 hours a day. We would have a brief and very cordial meeting once a week in his apartment at the Institute where I kept him fully in the loop about AEI affairs. At our August 2004 board meeting, I reminded the Board that we needed to get moving on the search to pursue a permanent executive director. Had the extraordinary events that follow not occurred, we probably would have filled that position within a few months and my part of the story would end here.

Up until this point, Al and I never had a single disagreement regarding the operation or philosophy of the Institute. Then, a problem occurred when a particular staff member had to be dismissed for professional reasons that have been publicly documented elsewhere. For any responsible, reputable and ethical mental health organization, this action would have been a routine matter that would have been handled at the supervisory level. However, in this case, our entire senior staff and a majority of the Board including all of its clinical members at the time as well as AEI's corporate counsel were involved in each of the decisions regarding this delicate matter. We agreed at the time and unambiguously since then, that there was no other alternative but to terminate this person immediately, in spite of Al's vehement opposition.

This was the first time in AEI's 50-year history that AEI's leadership made and firmly stood by a decision that was deeply contrary to Al's position on a matter that Al considered very important to him. It was then that we all fully understood that Al actually considered the Institute to be under his proprietorship as opposed to the not-for-profit organization he set up as a charity in the 1950s that had to be governed by very strict New York State not-for-profit laws as well as clear standards for clinical practice. This was also the point at which Al became and remained permanently estranged from most of us whom he had then considered his inner circle. He got himself a lawyer and formed a new inner circle of supporters, who often behaved in a fanatic and cult-like manner. To those of us who had to run AEI, it quickly became clear that we were up against a highly adversarial, almost bunker-like mentality. Many of them saw Al as a "victim" trying to "get his institute back". Al, who throughout his entire career preached against "victimhood" in all of its forms (a word he even coined), now embraced it.

One of the established roles of AEI's management was to handle many of Al's personal affairs such as his financial and legal matters. (Up until this time, I had also been one of the trustees of his trust fund and a co-executor of his will.) Continuing that practice during this new adversarial climate was becoming impractical for all parties. Moreover, we were aware of a series of unwise decisions that the 92-year-old Albert Ellis had made, but were powerless to intervene. Al had little family, but we tried to enlist the help of the one family member we knew, to get involved by taking charge of those personal matters that did not involve AEI. When he declined, AEI Board members realized that since Al had his own legal counsel, all we could do was whatever was necessary to run the Institute and to safeguard the interests of its clients, staff and trainees. Al lived in the building. Therefore, he could still do a very limited amount of training and therapy, and was always accompanied by or within earshot of a nurse. At this point, we very much supported the work he did. Through our attorneys, however, we negotiated Al's stepping down as board president and named him President Emeritus of the Institute.

In the months ahead, we started receiving well-documented complaints about the way Al was conducting his group supervision sessions, the trainings he was still participating in and his Friday Night workshops (a well-known and popular New York City staple for over 45 years that often packed the house with as many as 200 attendees). Our director of training, clinical director, senior clinical staff, several clinical board members and I tried to do everything in our power to address and remedy the complaints directly with Al.

Most people who are familiar with Albert Ellis' approach know that he had a unique style that was truly his own. He was confrontational, and his language was colorful. A few people were turned off by it. However, to the vast majority of those who observed his countless demonstrations of REBT over the years for just about every major audience of psychotherapy professionals that existed, this was an endearing and certainly harmless trademark and considered it part of his charm. Most correctly saw these confrontations in the context of genuine caring and concern for his patients/clients and/or those with which he demonstrated his approach.

However, by the time he was almost 92 that feistiness was morphing over the line to what was described by many as blatant abuse. In other words, he was becoming a caricature of his former self. He had always had his legendary temper, but this had a much more "out of control" quality to it. In addition, we were receiving reports of Al hitting people with his cane as well as other inappropriate behavior. Furthermore, he could not hear very well and refused to accept any kind of additional hearing accommodations except for assistance from his new wife (who acted as his hearing assistant at workshops and presentations). We explored every other viable option to protect the people who came to the Friday Night Workshops for help (sometimes to work on serious personal or relationship problems) as well as our trainees from the disturbingly intemperate and often abusive outbursts, etc. After much deliberation, our senior clinical staff and I painfully agreed that the time had come for us to suspend the Friday Night Workshops and completely curtail Al's training duties and other clinical activities in order to protect the public, Al's and AEI's reputations. Because of the gravity of the situation, I again consulted a majority of the Board, our legal counsel and several other mental health professionals who were long-term

staples of the Institute. All of those who were in the loop regarding this delicate matter unanimously supported the decision based on both observation and feedback.

AEI's board (with all but two of its members who sided with AI) issued a resolution affirming this decision. AI's suspension was with full pay. He still occupied his apartment on the entire top floor of the Institute and he had the same office as he always had (though he rarely went down to use it). In addition, he still received his same medical coverage and all the benefits that every other full time employee of the Institute enjoyed. The support staff handled his work as it always had. In other words, nothing really changed for AI other than being relieved of certain duties at the Institute that those AI had selected to oversee AEI—including its quality of professional services--determined that he was no longer able to perform to the minimum standards that that AI himself had championed for AEI professionals. To use our attorney's metaphor, we had the same obligations a hospital would have if it had on its staff a "surgeon with shaky hands".

As always and to his everlasting credit, AI continued to spend a great deal of his time in bed writing, when he was up to it. He even managed to complete a book and several articles.

An unrelated, but pivotal event took place around the same time. Our attorney, the former head of the Charity Bureau of the NY State Attorney General's Office was advising us very specifically on every step we took. He along with our independent auditors, Eisner and Co. informed us that we could no longer pay for AI's round the clock nursing bills (which began before my tenure as executive director and were costing the Institute several hundreds of thousands a year at this point). The problem was that they constituted "excess benefits" as defined by law, which could potentially threaten the Institute's not-for-profit status and even put AEI's substantial assets in jeopardy. (This included the building owned by the Institute where AI had also lived for over four decades. AEI had always provided a spacious rent-free apartment to AI, which had a rental value of over \$100,000 per year in this very exclusive Upper East Side neighborhood in Manhattan. Similar buildings on that same block were selling for \$20,000,000 and more. The Institute as a charity had secured this building in the 1960s under that era's Board—including AI who was then board president---and several early Institute supporters who collectively made it happen). Our lawyer then advised us to vote AI off the Board and negotiate a settlement between him and the AEI for reimbursement of those "excess benefits" that AEI had paid him, in order to remedy the problem. Although nobody wanted to take this action, we believed we had no choice but to follow that advice immediately. The motion carried unanimously except for one abstention. I can attest that most of us on the Board acted with a great deal of thought and deliberation, countless emails, meetings and teleconferences as well as the legal advice from the person we believed was New York State's top not-for-profit attorney.

Next, AI and his new handlers filed three very high profile lawsuits. The whole matter received a massive amount of media attention in New York (major stories in the NY Times, Post and Daily News, NY Magazine and many others) in addition to several professional publications. Some of the reporting was more objective than others, but much of it painted AI as a victim. As a result, there were demonstrations and pickets outside the Institute, death threats against me and others (making extraordinary security measures necessary including an armed plainclothes bodyguard), scores of hate mail and also an outpouring of support for us (in addition to the vitriol) from all around the world. Of course, most of the facts of this bizarre and complex situation were omitted from the articles. At the beginning, nobody from the Institute (other than our lawyer), nor anyone else who was objective about the matter was interviewed for many of the stories. This was because we were initially advised by our attorney not to speak to reporters due to the lawsuits.

However, AI and his minions would speak to anyone who would listen, regardless of whether or not they bought ink by the barrel. For example, in the same NY Magazine article entitled "Behaviorists Behaving Badly--Why Albert Ellis Isn't Allowed To Work At The Albert Ellis Institute" where AI admitted to having sex with ex-patients, he was quoted as saying "... Michael Broder—the director of this institute is a power freak! And it would be better if he were dead, dead, dead!"

A few days later, he repeated that same sentiment: this time screaming it over the phone to a NY Post reporter who also included it in his story.

Soon, it became apparent that we had to respond. As the media wave got larger and more out of control, we began to get our story out; and that was another difficult and delicate balancing act. So we hired a well-known national PR firm to help us quickly and effectively defend all of our reputations along with AEI's and even protect a rapidly declining AI from himself. When I asked one of the NY Times reporters why he and "the paper of record" were so fascinated with this story, he said, "Albert Ellis against the Albert Ellis Institute? You couldn't make this up". That said it all and ultimately gave me a new appreciation for the cliché, "truth is stranger than fiction" (!). I also better understood Pulitzer's famous media truism, "When dog bites man, it's not news; but when man bites dog, that's news". To me, it is still astounding that so many professionals and others who involved themselves in this crisis either did not realize or didn't care that they were creating a circus by exploiting and helping to negatively impact the legacy of a once great man who had simply lost his ability for self-regulation.

Meanwhile at AEI, (thankfully) I had the loyalty and full support of our entire staff (with the exception of one or two part-timers who had bought into that notion of AEI belonging exclusively to AI) as well as all of our fellows (who we also kept very much in the loop). AEI clients—many of whom had seen Dr. Ellis in therapy, a workshop or a group at one time or another---were reading about AEI and this crisis almost daily in NY newspapers and magazines as well as on the Internet. At times, clients were even talking about it in their sessions and in groups. This was a nightmare! Yet, we had an Institute to run and we were all committed to making things as transparent as possible for the many that were affected by this crisis.

Then, there was the vicious and international Internet PR and "dirty tricks" campaign launched against us, by a handful of AI's fiercest supporters from all around the world, one or two Friday Night Workshop regulars and some ex-patients, consisting of many half-truths, distortions, bad fiction story lines and outright lies. Some examples that I'll respond to include: The Board and I betrayed AI and launched a hostile takeover/coup d'état to wrest the Institute from AI, for power and/or money (Had any of this been the case, the intense scrutiny we were getting from both the media and AI's supporters would have quickly flushed this out and exposed it many times over). Some alleged we were spreading lies about AI and his wife (The well crafted talking points and spin from AI's entourage aside, nobody has ever produced a shred of evidence of any deception on our part toward anyone.); that I (not AI) was the one getting excess benefits (Some of the amounts of money I read about that I reportedly was getting paid were actually amusing.), that I was practicing psychology in NYC without a NY license (I never saw a single client there, I only ran the place. The only state where I ever practiced psychology is Pennsylvania where I have been licensed since 1979); and we were not allowing him to write (Quite the opposite was true. We had gotten him a new literary agent, encouraged it, and made sure he had whatever support staff he needed to do his work, as writing was the one professional activity he could do without triggering the issues for which his activities had to be curtailed.).

Some that made the rounds which are even too ridiculous to respond to include; we were religious fanatics persecuting AI for his atheism, we were funneling money to Romania, we threw or were trying to throw AI out on the street, we were controlling his visitors (as well as his phone calls, mail and medicine), we were forcing him to live in squalor, we were changing/watering down REBT and undermining AI's lifelong work, that he was the victim of "elder abuse" as well as the victim of ageism (at 92!) and/or a band of psychopaths and/or corporate thugs and still other screeds that were even more absurd!

These tales ultimately accomplished little except to further aggravate, confuse and enrage an increasingly isolated AI each time he heard a new story about how he was being "wronged". Had there been an iota of truth to any of the above allegations, the collective loyalty of AEI's long-time staff who worked in the building every day and were keenly aware of what was going on, would

have certainly been with AI---not with me or a board that wanted to be unfair to AI or do any harm to him at the end of his life.

Most simply, I can summarize the perspective and philosophy of that faction of Albert Ellis supporters who were acting most like zealots:” Albert Ellis is the Albert Ellis Institute, period”; (and it was more than a disagreement as to where to put an apostrophe), “The rules don’t apply to him and he should be judged by a different standard than all of the rest of us simply because he is Albert Ellis and we want it that way”. They were to learn that no matter how much they “whined” (to use another famous Albert Ellis vernacular) or circulated online “petitions” with bogus signatures, this simply could not be an option. Add to that the attitude that no spin or lie is too outrageous to tell if it will help AI get back control of ” his Institute” and destroy those they/he perceived as “his enemies”.

Some of those new “friends of AI” were people who may have merely attended a presentation or read one of AI’s books. There were also a few who had been asked to leave the Institute as long as several decades earlier---and even some who at one time or another wanted to train at the Institute, but were rejected when they applied---used this as an opportunity to finally be able to kiss up to AI, now that he needed “friends”. Still others who felt they had been treated poorly during another era of AEI and had always seen AI as a “bully” and/or as someone who was not above creating new “facts” when the truth didn’t suit him, offered us praise for finally standing up to him after all these years. The only type of person I did not hear from during that period was somebody without an opinion. Many of AI’s well-meaning old colleagues thought he was in some type of real peril. I can only speak about the ones that contacted us. Most of these people understood the situation once it was explained to them (or after they heard AI speak at that time and became starkly aware of his state of mind).

When this was at a fever pitch, a number of nameless, faceless bloggers as well as a few self-righteous and out of the loop professionals, ex-patients and virtually everything in between---who thought they had the answers---weighed in often with shrill, nasty and highly defamatory statements. A few of these situations even necessitated legal action on our part against some individuals who repeated and embellished upon one lie after another. Bad Shakespearian and psychoanalytic clichés also appeared in major print from a few self-promoting individuals who should have known a lot better. It is unfortunate how misinformation can spread unchecked via the Internet and our tabloid news culture, which often sets up the climate for some people to respond with knee jerk hostility regardless of whether or not they know (or care about) the facts.

It is certainly true that AI helped many people throughout his long and distinguished career: patients/clients, workshop attendees, those he mentored, readers of his books and articles, friends, etc. Thus, it is understandable how some perceived that a man who meant a lot to them was being treated unjustly and they wanted to come to his assistance. However, their allegations were untrue and often grossly distorted or downright wrongheaded. The campaign in which they were participating only made it harder for us to focus on our primary goal, which was to safeguard the legacy of AI and AEI. Meanwhile, those of us at AEI never for a minute stopped honoring him and carrying on with his work. Many of those who acted poorly toward us came to understand this later.

In the final analysis, one of the things that AI taught us all explains it best: we believe what we choose to believe. Thus, those who believed that AEI belonged to AI, also tended to believe he got a raw deal. However, those who believed AEI was a genuine not-for profit institution (as AI set it up to be and maintained it as for fifty years), believed we were doing the right thing---painful and difficult as it was. On a theoretical level, I could probably argue either side of the AE vs. AEI conflict; but when I was the executive director and a board member, my responsibility was clearly to the Institute and not to any one individual---even if his name was Albert Ellis. This was the way a majority of the other board members and virtually all of the staff viewed this crisis as well.

On a personal note, I am happy to say that nothing but support came from colleagues who know me personally, most AEI affiliates around the world and the vast majority of the larger professional community with whom I had any communication. In short, like the AEI staff, they realized that our actions were borne of necessity, never malevolence. Still, since my job as executive director required me both to manage the day-to-day operation of the Institute and to carry out board directives, my name was usually the one that appeared in print. Thus to many, I became the face of AEI during the controversy and therefore to some, the brand name "villain".

We were in a classical double bind: if we followed the law and our professional obligations as psychologists, we would receive the threats and defamation. If not, I do not believe we deserve to be members of this great profession. Of course, we did not have the luxury of putting our fingers into the air to decide which way the wind was blowing, nor should we have. There was only one option, and that was to carry out our fiduciary responsibilities as best we could. And even though not one objective person who knows the facts and the timing of them has taken issue with our actions, I acknowledge that had I only heard the spin from the other side and not been right there as the crisis unfolded, I might have believed it myself.

Originally, I had agreed to stay only a short time until we found a permanent executive director. By now, partly due to this situation, I had been there two years and the crisis was fortunately coming to a plateau. Policies and procedures were now firmly in place and endorsed by a solidly reliable board majority to insure that AEI would go on to operate properly and with transparency. Its clients, trainees and staff would have the protection they deserved and certainly relied on us to provide. For the first time since the crisis had started one year before, I felt that I had a window of opportunity to leave my job as executive director. Thus, with a great sense of relief and no ambivalence whatsoever, I took that opportunity.

After I left as executive director, I completed my term on the Board in February 2008 as an inactive backbencher. Although asked to stay on by my board colleagues, I declined another term. As of now, I am by choice no longer involved in any capacity with The Albert Ellis Institute and have no plans to be in the future.

None of the legal issues were resolved at the time of Al's death, with the exception of him being reinstated to the Board due to a highly publicized technicality that was ruled on after I had resigned as executive director: We had voted him off during a regular board meeting rather than holding a special meeting for the purpose of "removing a member", as AEI's bylaws had stipulated. Our then attorney---despite studying our bylaws and having even authored a textbook on the subject--- had given us the emphatic advice to do just what we did, and the judge called him on it. The Board quickly opted for new representation once it became clear that we had been operating on bad legal advice. Then under the guidance of our new counsel, the Board wisely chose not to inflame the situation any more. Thus, we neither appealed the decision nor simply held that special meeting our bylaws called for in order to vote Al off, as even the judge had suggested we do. Therefore, Al remained a board member as well as president emeritus until he died.

On an organizational level, this was a crisis not-for-profit experts refer to as "founder's syndrome". I am told many not-for-profits go through this type of crisis at the point when an organization or foundation outgrows its founder who has an illusion of immortality and/ or believes the organization belongs to him or her alone.

So why did I choose to write about this now? First, to simply set the record straight and answer some of the questions I am still frequently asked. In that spirit, here are few additional facts and thoughts:

- As I look back, the only thing I would have done differently is to have gotten more diverse legal advice and formal opinions, rather than relying solely on the guidance of AEI's one corporate attorney. Thus, I would urge anyone in a similar situation to get at least one

additional independent opinion regardless of how much gravitas your attorney has in his/her specialty.

- Most of the specifics I have included in this article have previously been made public at one time or another. Out of deep respect for Albert Ellis' legacy and my three-decade long association with him before this crisis began, I have no plans to say much more publicly than I have in this article, as it would serve little purpose. Many of the other well-documented facts that both precipitated and coincided with this crisis are very personal to the late Dr. Ellis, his legacy and the long and distinguished history of AEI. Some are already in the public domain and not relevant to this article. However, most are not; and I hope that for the sake of Al's legacy they remain private. But let the record show that it was the only the change in Al's state of mind--- obvious and well known to those of us who were around him, that necessitated most of the actions we had to take.
- If I made any decisions, created any policy, or took any actions as executive director that were ill advised, the Board and new management have had over 3 years to reverse them. That they have not done so is an indication that all has stood the test of time. We did our jobs as the law, our standards for professional ethics as well as our consciences required us to do and under very difficult circumstances. For that, I will always be proud of the team with whom I served.
- After becoming executive director, I came to know that in reality, many people left AEI during Al's heyday under much less than ideal circumstances. Were it not for Al's decline, which affected so many people at the Institute he built, I certainly would have resigned long before things escalated. I believe that many, if not most of those who had to deal with this crisis would have simply walked away as well.

The other reason for writing this article is that I believe that the issues raised by this situation speak to all of us. One of the great things about our field is that we each have a front row seat in the arena of life that few other professions offer. Hopefully, our challenges give us at the very least a learning experience that we will have the opportunity in some way to pass along to others. Such is my hope with what was my most difficult career challenge so far.

It has prompted me to do something I urge each of you to do in your own way. I have given detailed instructions to the two colleagues I am most proud of: my wife, Dr. Arlene Goldman and my daughter, Dr. Joanne Broder Sumerson, as to what to do, should they ever find themselves in a similar situation with me as I was with Al. By that, I mean in a phase of my life when I am unable to make rational choices and/or I am past the point where I can practice competently; but am unwilling or incapable of acknowledging it. What I asked them to do in that hypothetical situation is to take charge and proceed in a manner that is remarkably similar to those measures we took with Al. Moreover, the "me of today" would be extremely proud, if their intentions and actions were similar to ours and either or both of them handled it in as thoughtful and compassionate a manner as our staff and Board actually did, while I was executive director. And in case I forget what I told them, they have this article to remind me.

Even more importantly, I as well as others who knew him best, strongly believe (though we certainly can't prove it now) that the Albert Ellis we knew for so many years before his decline--- who wanted to see AEI go on for another 100 years---would also have supported the decisions we made and the actions we took. Had we run the actual situation that occurred by him as a hypothetical as little as 3 years earlier, we believe he would have been on our side. I wish we had been given clear instructions through a living will from a lucid Al regarding what to do with many of the matters we were left to deal with. To the extent that they were consistent with NY State law

as well as the professional standards of practice that regulate our field, they would most likely have been carried out to the letter.

A larger than ever number of mental health professionals are coming to that stage of life where they could potentially face retirement dilemmas and other issues similar to those of Albert Ellis in his final years. Absent a well thought out plan for phasing out that includes succession and the appointment of someone to make difficult decisions regarding such extremely delicate matters as their competence and which professional activities they are qualified to perform, etc. many colleagues will also find themselves in positions similar to mine and the other AEI board members. Therefore, this is something for everyone in our field to think about for our colleagues and ourselves as we age. The irony was that until almost the end, Al---at times---could perform nearly as well as always; but at other times, he simply could not and refused to hear feedback---even from those he had worked with and trusted for decades. We could not find a mutually agreeable way to have him independently evaluated. This is another problem begging for a remedy! Perhaps a living will can also clearly put that in place so that it could be triggered if needed.

I do not believe it's enough to be okay to practice competently a mere 30, 40 or 50% of the time (or even 90%). Remember, that theoretical "surgeon with shaky hands" cannot be left in a position to do harm no matter how much he loves to perform operations or his patients love him. Obviously, regardless of a professional's specialty, nobody deserves to be the recipient of services during that inevitable episode when he or she is not up to the minimum standards of practice. Colleagues who try to help impaired professionals of all stripes to recognize their blind spots often find the feedback they offer to be unwelcome; and in many cases, they are powerless to address the situation adequately. APA, our state psychological associations and other organizations that both serve and regulate mental health professionals need to recognize this problem and develop better protocols to address it. It would be heartening if such procedures could become yet another dimension of Al's vast legacy.

Many friends and colleagues have asked me about my feelings regarding my one time mentor, Albert Ellis. They are complex. I want to remember him as the man he was before his decline. He was brilliant, profoundly dedicated to his work, eager to be of help to anyone who needed it, quite controversial and all too human. Whether in fact he will ultimately be compared next to Freud, Skinner and Rogers is a matter to be determined by historians, probability not yet born.

Al's obituaries were just as glowing as they should have been. Yes, he was an icon and a legendarily innovative psychologist, who for well over a half a century was right on the cutting edge. Along with giants such as Drs. Aaron T. Beck, Arnold Lazarus and others, he paved the way for cognitive behavioral therapy to become the most effective and mainstream form of treatment today. He was generous almost to a fault with his time and candor to students, patients, colleagues, and anyone else who sought him out, as well as perhaps the most prolific writer our field has ever known---70 some books and almost 1000 articles. Hundreds of mental health professionals considered him an important mentor. And the sheer number of clients he saw throughout his 60 plus year career is astounding! That along with his countless other contributions to psychology, self-help and the New York culture earned him a NY Times front-page obituary.

Albert Ellis had a wonderful life. He lived it according to his passions to an extent that very few people ever allow themselves to do. He showed us by example, that the way to fulfill ones purpose is to remain staunchly dedicated to it. In Al's case, that purpose touched millions of lives and created ripple effects that will reverberate forever.

However, as that great luminary of our field, Dr. Arnold Lazarus said in a quote giving his take on Al, which also appeared in that infamous NY Magazine article, "I call this the Muhammad Ali syndrome. Had Ali quit three years sooner and not taken such a pounding, he might not have severe Parkinson's. Ellis is a heavyweight, but he didn't know when to quit." I strongly agree!

Those of us who were in the trenches during this affair know it was not personal and that any responsible individual or group who found themselves in the position of having to bring an organization through a crisis such as this would see little alternative but to carry out the actions that need to be taken---however difficult they may be at the time. The AEI and Dr. Albert Ellis' work will go on. Yet, I find it sad not to have been able to make peace with AI before he died. However, there is something most of us help those we treat at times to understand: it's not always possible to make peace with that "other person", only yourself. That I can say I have done.

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