

"Ya Think Anyone Will Remember Beethoven in 500 Years?  
-- A Personal Memory of Albert Ellis"

by Joe Rhinewine, Ph.D.

I first encountered Albert Ellis in an undergraduate psychology course at the University of Maryland. In the "Gloria" films, Ellis treats the therapy patient with a cool, distant, almost sneeringly rational approach, in stark contrast to the warmth shown to her by Carl Rogers, and the bull-in-a-china-shop provocation she was subjected to by Fritz Perls in the same film. In his post-session analysis, Ellis declares in a nasal New York tirade that could rival Bob Dylan's singing for effectiveness-via-gratingness, his now classic formulation of just about anyone's problems: "The client, in a grandiose fashion, DEMANDS that life be different from the way it is... In this way, she makes herself anxious and depressed."

A young but curmudgeonly New Yorker myself, I was immediately sympathetic to Ellis' approach. I had read Freud and some of the neo-Freudian writers in my late teens and early twenties, and they left a deep impression, but suggested little to me as to how exactly my life and those of others might be improved. On the other hand, Ellis' was a practical approach I could understand and put to immediate use, at least with myself: "Stop whining and start working on solving problems." While in graduate school I sought out opportunities to see Dr. Ellis speak, and after one abortive attempt in which a foot malady prevented his appearance, I finally caught him at an APA conference. It was in a symposium with several other luminary therapists from various approaches, a quite interesting panel discussion. The question put to each therapist was, "what are the three elements that make your therapy effective?" To this question Ellis glibly answered, in his nasal caterwaul, "Meeeee, meeeee, meeeee!!!" He proceeded to patiently review his formulation that most, if not all neurotic and personality problems are due essentially to a single cognitive-behavioral factor, namely, demandingness. I became further intrigued by this iconoclastic and refreshingly arrogant personality, who at 85 was sounding, well, more or less exactly the same as he did at 45 on the Gloria film, except a good bit raspier.

To get some more of that rusty-can voice of reason, I actually ordered the infamous tape from the 1970's, available from his Center for Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy, of Ellis singing a number of ancient popular songs--songs which he states "we all know," but by "we" he must have been referring to the class of 1906--rewritten to explicate principles of RET. That is, the principles of REBT. Ellis started out calling his approach Rational Therapy (RT) in the 50's, then added the "Emotive" part (RET), and later the "Behavior" part (REBT); some in his circles joked that he'd keep adding letters until it was an anagram for ALBERT: "Meeeee, meeeee, meeeee!!!"

Among the best of these tunes, in which Ellis sings accompanied by what sounds like a cheap Casiotone keyboard, are those which emphasize that monofactor theory of psychopathology:

"Demandingness will land you less than what you really want,

and whininess increases stress, and just leaves you haggard and gaunt!"

and...

"Life must be easy, people must be caring,  
When they do not please me I get most despairing,  
I cannot stand a single bit of strife, so I demand a perfect life!"

and, perhaps most effectively...

"I cannot get all of my wishes filled -- whine, whine, whine!  
I cannot have every frustration stilled -- whine, whine, whine!  
Life really owes me the things that I miss  
Fate has to grant me eternal bliss  
And if I must settle for less than this: whine, *whine*, *WHINE!!!*"

Aside from being entertained by these gems of a therapist's exasperation with irrational behavior, I became particularly struck with the similarity between Ellis' views and those of Buddhism. As a Buddhist meditator in the Zen tradition, I had been exposed to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn prior to graduate school, and soon eagerly incorporated aspects of his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) into my developing CBT approach. MBSR draws on Buddhist concepts in that it emphasizes that tension and suffering arise due to a gap between one's beliefs about the way things should be, versus the way things in fact are. Other mindfulness-oriented therapies have been developed recently, also emphasizing this discrepancy between reality and one's insistent expectations of reality as the source of human suffering, including Marsha Linehan's Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Steven Hayes' Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; See Jason Luoma's recent article in the present journal) and Segal et al's Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).

Still, I wondered, what did Ellis himself think of all this Buddhism in the mix? He had often railed against religion as one of many sources of human irrationality. Too, I had my questions about psychoanalysis and psychodynamic theories, which seemed too rich and descriptive to be dismissed, and also to represent a valuable source of methods of dealing with both client- and therapist-based resistance to the therapeutic process. I became interested in barraging Dr. Ellis with all of my questions about his approach, and kept my eyes open for an opportunity to do so. Since my internship was in New York City, I figured that I would get together with a few friends and attend one of Ellis' famous Friday evening open sessions at his Center. Somehow though, getting that group of people together kept not happening, or when it did, Ellis, now 88, had to cancel due to medical problems.

I was at the time struggling to finish my dissertation, which, far from being based on REBT theory, actually made use of psychoanalytic models to explain sense of self in family members of schizophrenia patients. Nonetheless, I figured that Dr. Ellis might have some words of wisdom for me in overcoming my procrastination. And, I had heard

that he was still seeing patients in individual therapy. I wasn't sure I could afford it, or that he'd have room to see me, but I called the Center. It turned out he did not take my insurance, but only charged \$100 per session, in a belief that therapy should not be exclusively costly. I eagerly scheduled a first session. In truth, my heart thumped with excitement. Albert Ellis! All to myself for an hour! To me, this was better than meeting Freud himself, because I'm not sure Freud and I would have understood each other, or had as much to talk about.

On the scheduled day I arrived at the center and filled out paperwork, including an MCMI and various REBT-oriented measures. I felt reassured by the somewhat decrepit New York building and surly support staff. I was sent upstairs via an elevator that contained post-its and baggies reminding Dr. Ellis, a diabetic, to eat something. I entered his room to find a large, book-cluttered office with the 88-year-old Ellis sitting in a recliner, both his legs propped up, with a hearing aid in each ear.

"Come on in..." he rasped.

The conversation that followed I will treasure all my days. Ellis seemed perfectly accustomed, or at least unsurprised, by the situation of a young, aspiring psychologist scheduling an appointment with him mostly to meet him; however, he said that this situation did not come up often, that mostly he saw patients via referral who didn't even know who he was. He indicated that he'd be happy to answer any questions I had about himself, REBT, or my own issues. I will offer a few topical quotes from the conversation, as best I remember it. They're not the same without his voice but the reader may use his/her imagination!

On REBT:

"Aaron Beck stole all my ideas... Nobody did this stuff before me. Still, it's good that he did all that research on it, because I don't care to do it."

On Buddhism:

"The Buddhists almost get it right, but they LOUSE IT UP with this Nirvana stuff."  
(Ellis takes issue with the idea that suffering can or should ever cease, and views the concept as dangerously misleading).

On psychoanalysis:

(Ellis gets visibly agitated and raises his voice when I asked whether it can at least promote better self-awareness.)

"It's worthless! Most of the people out there doing psychoanalysis are making their patients worse. Totally worthless."

On mortality:

(Seemingly without relevance to my input, Ellis begins to speak about finitude of life.)  
"All that you do will probably eventually be forgotten. Ya think anyone'll remember Beethoven in 500 years? Probably not."

On myself:

"So, how *meshuggah* were your parents?" (*Meshuggah* is Yiddish for "crazy".)

"You say you have to finish your dissertation. It's a pain in the neck! So just do it and get it done."

"...come back when you have a problem!"

I did in fact come back for a second session, in which we delved a bit into my own unique brand of irrationality, about which I shall spare the reader the dull details. After that session, I concluded that while I dearly revered him as a mentor and was humbled beyond words by the opportunity to have gotten to know him a bit, it did not seem right to continue seeing him as a regular patient. His approach seemed to me to be, unsurprisingly, a bit of a one-note, or one-factor, symphony, if the reader will forgive the mixed metaphor. In addition, our communication was hampered somewhat by his limited hearing. I did, however, take his words closely to heart--that my dissertation was simply a "pain in the neck" and that it simply had to get done if I wanted to be a psychologist. Not exactly a revelation, but coming from the self-styled "Saint Albert," his admonishment helped me get the project done.

On hearing of his death, I was greatly saddened, but of course, quick to remember that Ellis would say that, while sadness is rational, depression is not! While I feel the mild sting of grief behind my eyes and in my chest at the passing of this great man and grandfather-figure, I am at the same time grateful for the poignant reminder of both mortality and rationality that his death offers us. The Buddha is said to have preached that all great Dharmas (teachings) begin to fade and transform after about 500 years. Here's hoping that the Dharma of Albert Ellis will echo on beyond 500 years, through the millennia, transforming and being transformed by all those it continues to touch. And, if it doesn't, well, tough luck. Where is it written that it should?