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A Brief History of Psychotherapy

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Efforts to remedy physical and mental disorders and improve the minds and bodies of men have been attempted, evidently, since the earliest days of homo sapiens.

In the barbaric societies which yet exist in the world one sees what must have been the earlier methods still in use. The Australian bushman has his witch doctor whose chief tool is a magic healing crystal. One finds chants and drums in the Goldi region. One still finds a technique in China of "letting out devils" by a puncture. With drums, chants, yoga, rattles, herbs, prayers and electric shock, Man has fought a continuous battle with mental aberration and psychosomatic illness since the very dawn of Man.

In that Man's best weapon was his mind, he has worked ceaselessly to improve that weapon. He has continuously observed that an individual was as healthy and active and successful as he had a healthy body and a quick mind.

The searches of India go back into the ages before written history and demonstrate that India itself has long since sunk into an apathy on the subject, regardless of the data accumulated, for her goal is to abandon life as the only means of obtaining serenity.

Many, many ages after India's highest efforts, we find the early Greek absorbed in the problem, and his speculations formed until only yesterday the main bulk of knowledge used in the Western World on the subject of the mind. The Greek had an actual therapy which, though inefficacious, was yet pursued as more than nothing. This therapy had two divisions. The first consisted of shock treatments through the use of hellebore. The second consisted of what we now call "dream therapy" or "narcosynthesis" or "drug hypnosis." These techniques were poor enough so that the Roman resorted only to his household gods or to the deity of fever, Febris, for his remedies. But the early Greek treatment and the Asclepiadean practices in general are found in modern sanitariums. The additional experimentation of "psychosurgery," a technique closely approximated by the ancient Inca in Ecuador, has proven a complete failure and is seldom used by reputable mental practitioners, and then only as an experiment.

Convulsive shock from two thousand years ago, demon exorcism, gourd rattles, prayers and chants received their first rival—memory catharsis as developed by a Dr. Breuer—in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. Sigmund Freud later worked with Breuer and developed the libido theory, which became the background of psychoanalysis. Freud's development in 1894 was largely intuitive and he himself concluded it to be unworkable in 1920. Notwithstanding, Freud, repudiated even today by his own followers, was closer to truth than any other worker in the field in any age, as can be demonstrated.

After William James, in the last of the nineteenth century, a consistent but somewhat disorganized effort was made to apply the scientific methodologies to the human mind and much data was amassed in psychology; but the data was not well aligned, was mainly speculative, and so gave rise to countless schools of practice and investigation which remained in sufficient conflict to largely nullify an incursion by psychology into the society.

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The general practice of “mental healing” had deteriorated by the first third of the twentieth century from a ratio of around fifty human beings for every shaman or witch doctor in a barbaric society to one “mental practitioner” in the modern world to many hundreds of individuals. The percentage of alleviation of mental distress, however, continued about the same—an estimated twenty-two percent of the cases treated receiving temporary relief, but with the liability that the incidence of suicide amongst patients being treated markedly advanced.

This drop in the ratio of practitioners per populace is remarkable since the incidence of insanity in the society is evidently far higher than in barbaric societies. This might be construed to indicate that “mental healing” had lost considerable ground.

However, despite an inability to remedy, the psychologist and medical doctor tabulated considerable data about mental and physical illness. It was discovered, for instance, that some seventy-one percent of all Man’s ills apparently resulted from mental stress; and it was supposed, but was not proven since the methods of treatment were not known, that these would relieve if one could solve the problem of the mind itself.

The data amassed by the mental practitioner and psychologist became useful in the investigations of this science. Many of their phenomena were improperly observed but such was the wide and diligent latitude of their researches that they demonstrated many spheres in which the answer did not lie, a necessary survey for any investigation.

Some two hundred new phenomena about the human mind have been established firmly in the mental treatment area of this new science. Many phenomena discovered earlier by the psychologist and mental practitioner have been confirmed or re-evaluated.

Under quiet test for over a year in the hands of leading psychologists and mental practitioners, the application of this science has been found to resolve cases with considerable ease so that in at least one state all state government treatment of the insane is shortly to be placed under practitioners such as psychiatrists and psychologists who are skilled in this new science.

LRH TAPE LECTURES

Wichita, Kansas

4 November—21 December 1951

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