PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear GPALA Community:

I love to brag to anyone who will listen about how I sit on the highest functioning, most cohesive and productive board of directors in the world of all-volunteer non-profits. Want evidence? Here’s a short list of what’s been accomplished in the last couple of years....

--Thanks to Social Chair Sheila Traviss, our annual summer and holiday parties have not only been our most attended ever, we’ve raised over $4000 for the Scholarship Fund.

--Thanks to Historian Marvin Kaphan, a digital archive has been created for photos and documents that could eventually tell the story of group therapy in Los Angeles.

--Thanks to Parliamentarian Michael Frank, GPALA's by-laws were updated and ratified by the membership at large.

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CREATURES OF A DAY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH IRVIN D. YALOM

William Whitney (WW): Thanks Dr. Yalom for agreeing to this interview. How did you get started in group therapy?

Irvin Yalom (IY): I started group therapy in my residency. There was a very good group therapist there, named Jerome Frank. I was one of his students and he was one of the first early leaders in the field. So, I watched his group for a whole year and later was a co-leader with him. I started doing a lot of groups in my residency, outpatient and also inpatient groups. I led some groups in a psychiatric prison nearby and when I came to Stanford (which came after my training and after a couple of years of mandatory time in the army), I started a very large group therapy program for psychiatric residents. For the next 10 years I did that very heavily, so I trained a lot of residents in group therapy and started experimenting with different types of groups, and different approaches to group therapy, starting groups for cancer patients, for example, and alcoholics. I started doing conjoint family therapy with Virginia Satir and Don Jackson, and family groups as well, but that was quite different.

WW: Why did you choose group over other modalities of treatment?

IY: Well, I had early training at Johns Hopkins, where the approach of interpersonal psychiatry was very much valued. That was the era of Harry Stack Sullivan at the William Alanson White Analytic Institute, and I was very interested in the interpersonal approach. If you believe, as I do, that people who come to see us have tremendous difficulties establishing nurturing, nourishing relationships,
If you believe, as I do, that people who come to see us have tremendous difficulties establishing nurturing, nourishing relationships, that’s something that we really need to look at. The group therapy approach seems the ideal place to look at that, to see what gets in the way of establishing close relationships—so I value group therapy very much as a wonderful medium of change.

WW: I wanted to ask you some questions about your new book. Can you tell me about the book and how you have changed through the writing of that book?

IY: I’ve just finished the book called ‘Creatures of a Day’ (Yalom, 2015). It’s a book based on a rather existentially oriented individual therapy, with ten stories in that book. It’s kind of a sister book to the other books I have written, like ‘Love’s Executioner’ and ‘Momma and the Meaning of Life’. I’ve changed along the way so that I was able to write a book like that. In my group therapy textbook one of the reasons that textbook was so interesting and successful for students was because it had a lot of small short stories embedded in it, smuggled in it. So students were more willing to put up with a lot of theory because there was an interesting story every paragraph or two. After that I began experimenting with just putting the narrative first as a way of teaching; so all my books of stories are a way to teach psychotherapy and this book is too. These are meant to be teaching stories and I’m just letting the narrative do the talking. It is a way of letting the narrative do the teaching here. So, I think that young psychotherapists will get a lot out of reading the book.

WW: Could you tell me how some of the key themes from your earlier work, i.e. freedom, meaning, death, and isolation, relate to your work now maybe 35 years later?

IY: All those key ultimate concerns are to be seen, even in this book of short stories. Many of the people in this book are concerned about death, the terror of death, about evanescence, about the inability to make decisions, and about the whole issue of how transient everything is. In fact the very name of the book is a quote from Marcus Aurelius about ‘creatures of a day’, that we are ‘but creatures of a day’, about how evanescent we all are.

WW: What tips would you give to therapists who are interested in doing some writing?

IY: Well, you have to love to read first—to be a good writer you have to make sense of interested readers. I’ve always been a great lover of fiction ever since I was an adolescent. I’ve always felt that writing a good book was one of the better things you could do in life, and I have always written rather fluently. If you haven’t had experience writing, then I think you need some help, catching an editor to work with, maybe even a writing group. There’s one at Stanford – a writing group for doctors – that I helped to found many years ago. The idea was that you could meet every couple of months to workshop one’s writing. You need to have some inputs along the way. I was fortunate enough to have my wife, who is a very good editor, and my son who’s a very good editor, so I got a lot of family help from that. If there are any creative writing programs, you could take one of those.

WW: In your book ‘The Gift of Therapy’ you talked about how the goal of therapy is very individualized for each patient, and I’m wondering if your idea about the goal of therapy has changed since that time. If someone asked you ‘what is the goal of therapy?’ now, what would you say?

IY: Well, it’s impossible to answer that question in general, I mean it depends on what the patient comes in for. I have had patients, and you’ll see in the new book, who are very satisfied with even a single consultation because they got something from it, and I was actually surprised that they got this from it. It depends on what they’re coming for and what they need. Some people need one thing and others need quite another thing. So it depends on what they need and want. It’s not always the same for everyone, for some people it is simply symptom relief, some people need a witness to their lives, some people are having a great deal of panic and anxiety and they need relief from that,
Some years ago I had a conversation with a colleague who requested that I speak at an event for her organization. I suggested the title “Girls and Grit” and the planning committee replied that “grit” made girls sound too tough. Could I come up with another title? Since then, grit has become a popular construct both in psychological and educational circles. It is what we want for our youth, boys and girls alike. Contemporary research defines grit as perseverance combined with passion, empowering kids and teens to keep at it through the tough times they will inevitably face. The robust research on mindfulness and happiness encourages us as group leaders to find ways of fostering these skills as well. I like to think of groups as “hardiness zones” - places where participants can grow in grit, happiness, and mindfulness.

Perhaps you have known some teens, as I have, who wish they could participate fully in their lives but are weighted down with fears and sadness, harsh self-criticism, or a deep sense of difference. Or perhaps some children you’ve worked with come to mind, children who long for happy connections in social worlds dominated by social cruelty. Grit can help – as can skills to enhance hardiness, happiness and mindfulness. Over the years, my colleagues at the Institute and I have found it both meaningful and fun to develop activities and tools to help children and teens develop a gritty mindset with hardiness, happiness and mindfulness skills. In this workshop we’ll review some of the relevant research on these constructs. Through demonstration and experiential activities we’ll foster our own grit, while learning tools to use in our “hardiness zones” for children and teens.

We are often overwhelmed with information, and increasingly experience stress and emotional dysregulation. As a result, we need to establish a natural balance between our need for greater awareness, and an ability to focus our attention on what matters—both individually and in relationships.

This is what mindfulness offers.

Mindfulness simply means awareness, and at the same time it is a practical science-based approach to paying attention, in the present moment, with a sense of curiosity. It helps us get out of the rut of avoidance and negative mental looping that characterizes so much of the suffering we experience today. At the same time, it’s a gentle approach toward nourishing the natural healing modalities of self-acceptance, self-compassion and self-love.

Neuroscience research over the past 15 years has led to staggering discoveries concerning the efficacy of integrating mindfulness into our approach to clients experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, addictive behaviors, insomnia, trauma, chronic pain and stress-related chronic illnesses. Mindfulness has helped thousands of people use their minds to change their brains, to open up to possibilities they hadn’t seen before, and, more generally, to lead happier and more productive lives.

In mindfulness-informed relationships, we begin to practice being more present naturally to the people around us. This is why research shows that practicing mindfulness is correlated with increases in empathy, compassion and feeling more connected, essential ingredients in resiliency and happiness.
One of the things that GPALA members generally have in common is a belief in the power of group therapy. That’s certainly one of the reasons we’ve chosen to run groups at our agencies and in our practices. And it’s one of the reasons we join GPALA, get continued training, go to the AGPA Annual Meeting, and for many of us, would gladly talk about group therapy to anyone who will listen. We’ve invested our time and energy in becoming group therapists and even spent our money on supervision because we believe that therapy done in a group setting is a modality that we value.

Some of us have personally been in groups that have changed our lives. We’ve watched clients transform before our eyes, make relationships that are more fulfilling than anything they’ve had before, or perhaps have their shame reduced by coming into contact with others who have walked the same paths. Some have been in groups in rehabs, or to deal with crippling bereavement, or learned about our unconscious inner worlds through being in a well-run process group.

As clinicians, we sometimes think that group therapy is better able to help clients grow to understand their own relationship dynamics, even more effectively than can be accomplished in the dyadic relationship of individual therapy. Or we have come to believe that having our clients simultaneously participate in a therapy group provides a powerful adjunct to the individual work we’re doing with them, affording them both a laboratory to work in relationship to others and a home to return to with us where they can more deeply process what they notice happening inside of them in the group. Or we just think group provides more bang for the client’s buck. Or we hope that other group members will honestly share reactions with our client that we can’t communicate as easily, not if we want to also maintain the therapeutic alliance.

With all this as a backdrop to our choice to run groups, why, then, do so many of us resist joining a group ourselves? Or why, despite our efforts to nudge clients into a group, do they shy away?

Understandably, the prospect of joining a group raises anxiety for any prospective group member – not just in the general population (that is, our clients) but even amongst our community of group therapists.

Anxiety about joining a group manifests in questions like these: What will I learn about myself? Will I feel things I don’t want to feel? Will the group accept me or will I feel like an outsider? Will I get judged? Who will be there? Will I like everyone and, if not, will I benefit? Will I have the patience to deal with someone I consider to be difficult? What if someone finds me to be difficult? And on and on. No wonder more people don’t clamor to get into groups.

GPALA will now offer a partial solution to this dilemma. We have found that people often move towards group therapy more willingly and with less anxiety if they’ve had the opportunity to try it without the burden of a long-term commitment. During 2015-2016, GPALA will offer an opportunity for you, your clients, or even your friends to participate in a 12-hour group therapy experience with one of our more seasoned local group clinicians.

Called the **GPALA Group Institute**, there are other benefits to your participation in one of these groups. We often learn from seeing how others do it, so being in group with the model of another therapist’s style of leadership might help you grow professionally. Some of you might decide to try more than one leader. And being in the role of group member can provide a window into what your own group clients experience.

These groups will meet for 12 hours in a single weekend, consecutive weekends, or perhaps on a weekday for several consecutive weeks. Each group leader is likely to require that each member agrees to certain guidelines that generally lead to everyone getting the most benefit: an agreement to maintain confidentiality, an agreement to attend all 12 hours, to show up on time and to stay for the entire group, and an agreement to do one’s best to put feelings and thoughts into words as they arise. Participation will cost between $120 and $200, depending on one’s membership and license status.

A caveat exists as well. While these groups are likely to be therapeutic, they should not be confused with the provision of psychotherapy. They are meant to merely give each member a taste of what group therapy can be.
CREATURES OF A DAY:
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(continued from page 1)

some people are searching for a sense of meaning in their life and you can be a counselor in helping them find out—it’s very varied.

WW: Can you tell me how being a group therapist and doing group therapy has enhanced your teaching?
IY: If you are teaching psychotherapy and there are areas of tension in the classroom, you can set wonderful examples by the way you handle that tension and help people talk openly. A lot of good teachers in counseling programs use their group therapy program as both as an experiential group and as a didactic group, offered simultaneously. They will go from one to the next, and I think that’s an awfully good way of teaching. We teach by being in this group especially with what we know about group dynamics. I’m getting feedback all the time, and when I am teaching in the classroom I want to break it up very frequently by saying ‘How are we doing now? Are you getting what you hoped for? When did you feel you were getting the most out of it, and when did you feel you were getting the least in this last hour?’ So, I got good feedback during individual and group therapy both.

WW: If you wanted people to know one or two things about your book, and why they should check it out, what would you say?
HW: I think it’s a good teaching book and it’s got a lot of lessons for therapists in the book, and it’s got lessons for showing how you can work with both brief and longer-term therapy. I hope people get a good deal from it.

WW: Do you mind signing your book for me?
IY: Sure!

WW: Thanks Dr. Yalom for your time.

References

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE
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--Thanks to Newsletter Chair William Whitney, we’ve expanded the staff of the newsletter and begun syndicating GPALA’s excellent interviews to other societies’ newsletters across the country.

--Thanks to Curriculum Chair Bonnie Katz, GPALA’s programming has become more diverse and inclusive of a greater variety of styles of therapy (DBT, spiritual, relational, etc.) in a greater variety of contexts (from long-term groups in a private practice to short-term groups in a treatment facility).

--Thanks to Jan Stolpe, GPALA has a brand new website. Check it out and if you are a GPALA member, make sure you’ve entered your information in our directory!

--Thanks to Membership Chair Liz Selzer-Lang, GPALA introduced the Ambassador Program that brings together new and veteran members. And with an assist by Secretary Saralyn Masselink, GPALA introduced tiered membership designed to make GPALA affordable for every group therapist, no matter what stage of career they are in.

--Thanks to Events Chair Rena Pollak, GPALA events have been centralized at one location (American Jewish University), and have become more polished and inclusive. Additionally, her efforts to recruit and find sponsors for our one-day conferences have made them much more cost effective.

--Thanks to Outreach Program Chair Maria Gray, literally hundreds of therapists at training sites, clinics and treatment centers have been introduced to group therapy and GPALA both through her presentations, and those of her committee members.

--Thanks to Conference Chair/President-elect Vanessa Pawlowski, the Annual 2-Day Conferences have featured blockbuster presenters like Molyn Leszcz and have been attended by more first-time attendees than ever before.

--Thanks to PR/Marketing Chair Annie Babin, all of the above was made possible and more successful by her marketing strategies, team management, beautiful design work and creative promotional ideas.

--Thanks to the financial discipline imposed by Treasurer Eddie Hunt, GPALA has $10,000 more dollars in our savings account than we did at the start of 2014—an increase of almost 75%!

And finally, one more person who deserves thanks is Administrator Lindsay Kenny. Lindsay assists every single person listed above and is absolutely invaluable to me in tracking all of our programs while fast becoming our institutional memory. She is indispensable.

Please help me in honoring these fine folks by dropping them a line of thanks, taking one of them out for coffee, or by referring to them! They are each and every one caring professionals who are generously giving back to our community.

Look forward to seeing you at one of our Fall events!

John
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Visit Us On the Web www.GPALA.org
keep up to date with information and register for our upcoming events
Volunteer at GPALA! contact Liz Selzer Lang at LizSelzerLangMFT@aol.com or 310-995-3228
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