

Embracing Subjectivity A Tribute to Jim Bugental 12/25/1915 – 9/18/2008

By Bob Edelstein, LMFT, MFT

James F. T. Bugental, Ph. D., served as the first president of the Association of Humanistic Psychology in 1962. He also helped organize the Old Saybrook Conference in 1964, a gathering of great minds which helped clarify the vision of humanistic psychology in the United States. Among those present with Jim at this seminal conference were his close friends, colleagues, and mentors – George Kelly, Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers.

I interviewed Jim for the February/March 2003 issue of the AHP Perspective. He told me he most wanted to be remembered for “more legitimacy for the subjective life. At a time when I was most productive, I was always trying to storm the wall of psychological science.”

In 1964, when Jim and his colleagues were convening at Old Saybrook, psychology emphasized the objectivity of science and the physical world. In training therapists the emphasis was on behaviorism and environmental interventions. There was a minimization or even dismissal of one’s subjective life. Jim and his colleagues emphasized and popularized humanistic psychology, which was termed the third force in psychology. This perspective included a focus on subjectivity as the main energy source and guiding force in our lives. Subjectivity is the accessing of one’s inner life - including thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, memories, images, hopes, fears, expectations, anxieties, perceptions, etc. Another focus is to translate one’s subjectivity through expression and actualization into the outer, objective, physical world. This was based upon the belief that we are beings-in-the-world.

One way Jim facilitated his clients and students moving deeper into their subjectivity was through the inward searching process. This entails paying attention moment by moment to the inner flow of consciousness moving through you. He emphasized that the present moment is the only true reality we have. Each of our present moment realities are uniquely ours. Jim encouraged us to trust that in each moment we would be pulled towards the direction that is right for each of us. And there is always something more, as one moment leads to another with a new set of awarenesses. Or as Jim liked to say, “And now... And now... And now...”

In honor of Jim, I thought it would be fitting to write a personal letter to him, as I search inwardly for what memories, feelings, and perceptions stand out now as I reflect on our relationship.

Dear Jim,

You were important to so many people, and you made such a profound contribution to the development of existential humanistic psychotherapy. I feel privileged to have had you as my mentor, friend, colleague, and second dad.

I loved your brilliant, clear and lucid mind. From the very beginning, when I first read *The Search for Existential Identity*, I have very much resonated with your ideas. This alignment has helped me feel strongly a part of the existential humanistic tribe. My work with clients is thoroughly infused with your continual emphasis on ‘inclusion, not amputation’ and ‘alliance and context’. Your ‘givens of being human’ are brilliant. I especially value your concept of the joker in the deck - that as human beings we are aware, and we are aware that we are aware, which allows us to be the authors of our own lives. It is exciting for me to see my students’ joy and enthusiasm when I teach and facilitate these viewpoints. Your philosophy and psychotherapy speak to my soul.

I loved your courage to share so openly who you were, moment by moment. There were no pat answers. You always did your own inward searching and were in touch with your subjectivity. Thus you were very

congruent, regardless of content. I remember when a student asked what made you such a great therapist. You paused, then got choked up when you replied that it was your deep belief in and awe of the courage of clients (and all human beings) to reclaim themselves despite tremendous past hurts, pains, and fears. I also remember you being very firmly challenging when you felt you needed to be. I recall a time when you were frustrated that we (your students) were not sufficiently tagging the resistances of our clients. You stood your ground until we understood and demonstrated what you were teaching us. Indeed, your courage to be so authentic was part of your masterful teaching.

I loved that you were so open to being challenged by your students and colleagues, and modifying your views if you felt it was warranted. It felt very good to me to experience your valuing of my personality and viewpoints, even when they were different from yours. I remember when I asked if you would provide phone case consultations for me. You said you were suspect of the idea because you liked to see the visual cues when working with clients and students. However, you agreed to try it out, and you later acknowledged how surprised and pleased you were that it was so very effective.

I loved the encouragement and validation you gave to your colleagues and students. You conveyed this through your gentle yet very powerful presence. I experienced this when I was creating an existential humanistic training and case consultation group. The training was based on your book, *The Art of the Psychotherapist*. You were very pleased with this, not because I was using your book, but rather because I was being creative and risk-taking in developing and implementing my own way to train colleagues and students.

I loved your humbleness. You refused to sit on the pedestal of cherished teacher to be idolized. I remember if one of us served you dessert at a residential conference, you would return the courtesy the next night. It was such a simple and direct expression of you treating us as equals.

I loved your irreverence and feisty attitude. I remember when our Art of the Psychotherapist group was concerned about your ageing and eventually dying. This was when you were only a chipper 80 years young. You let us know two reflections you had about your eventual dying. You said, "Don't worry - after I die, I will still be irascibly bugging you to do your work, personally and professionally, from wherever I will be." You also said "I'm not worried about dying. I figure people have done it before me, people will do it after me, so I figure I can do it too."

I loved your sense of humor, quick wit, and corny puns. One memory I have occurred in 2006, four years after your stroke, when my family was having brunch with you and Elizabeth. I said, "Jim, you look good." You said "You bet!" and promptly scanned the table, Elizabeth, and the room – to show me all the ways you see well. There was no denying that both things were true – you looked good and saw well. I also valued how your humor honored the vulnerability of the human experience. You emphasized that we are all on our unique paths, that none of us are perfect, and thus we are always learning and growing. I remember once sharing that at times I felt flat as a therapist and told you that I realized I became flat when I was trying to be too much like you, rather than being my authentic self. In those moments I would get confused, not knowing if I was Bob or Bugental. You smiled and said you empathized with my dilemma, for sometimes you didn't know if you were Jim or Bugental.

I loved your generosity. You made space in your schedule to come to Portland a few times to present workshops. One particular workshop was sponsored by The Association of Humanistic Psychology – Oregon Community. We were in our first year of existence. After the event was over, you surprised us with a donation of half of your profits to help get us off the ground financially. That seed money was valuable to us and all of the members were very touched by your gift. Also, organizing that event was an important bonding experience for us as an organization. That was fifteen years ago, and we are still going strong today.

I loved the deep love you and Elizabeth held for each other through 40 years of marriage. You were so real with and respectful of each other as you dealt with life's challenges and joys. I remember the deep love for you that Elizabeth demonstrated when she organized a workshop for the American Psychological Association Division 32 Conference in August 2007. The focus was on your major contributions to existential humanistic psychotherapy. She wanted you to receive the deep respect, love, and gratitude your many students and colleagues had for you. I also saw so clearly your deep love for Elizabeth during the 17 years I knew you. It was still strongly evident during the years after your stroke, when I would see you choke up and cry in expressing your love to her, and then reach

out your hand to hold hers. You and Elizabeth were great role models of what deep intimacy can be.

Jim, for all this and so much more, I loved the human being you were. Thank you for how profoundly you impacted so many people, professionally and personally. The world is a better place because you were here. Finally, thank you for how much and how deeply you have enriched my life. I love you.

BIO

Bob Edelstein, LMFT, MFT, is an existential humanistic psychotherapist based in Portland, Oregon. He started studying intensively with Jim in 1991. In addition to maintaining a private practice, he also provides consultation, supervision, and training for professionals. He can be reached at (503)288-3967 or Bob@BobEdelstein.com.