

ASPF

NEWSLETTER

Memorial Issue



GORDON DERNER

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FOR PSYCHOANALYSIS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY, INC.

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This special issue of the Newsletter of the Adelphi Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy is dedicated to the memory of Gordon F. Dermer, Dean of the Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies and Co-Director of the Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy at Adelphi University. Serving as administrator, educator and leader, Gordon Dermer endeared himself to those around him because of his wisdom and courage, and above all his humanity.

The following material attempts to capture the sense of Gordon Dermer as a person and his impact upon our membership and the profession of psychology. It consists of three parts:

1. The Eulogies - Several moving and inspirational eulogies were delivered by friends and colleagues at a Memorial Service shortly after Gordon's demise. We have included those given by members of the Society.

2. The Interview - This interview was conducted by Neil Grossman with Gordon Dermer. It recounts Gordon's enormous contributions to psychology and to the Adelphi Postdoctoral Programs, as well as giving us a precious glimpse of his low-keyed humor and informal style.

3. The Gordon Dermer Hour - This consists of anecdotes which were told at our Autumn 1983 retreat at Jeronimo's. People sat around and shared reminiscences and nostalgia related to times spent with Gordon. The stories highlighted the personal quality of his relationships with several of our members. They also provided a view of the colorful individual we know Gordon to have been.

We were indeed fortunate to have had Gordon Dermer among us; we are sorry to have lost him.

Elaine Dinitz
President ASPP

The Eulogies

I am grateful for the honor and opportunity to share with you a few of my memories of Gordon Derner. I would be remiss if I did not begin with a few words about Gordon as a psychologist, for that was such a central part of his identity. He was proud of his profession, justifiably proud of his contributions to it, and combative in its defense. I feel comfortable in asserting that the Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies has developed preeminent doctoral and postdoctoral training programs, and it is clear that if there had not been a Gordon Derner, there would not be an Institute. It will remain as a living memorial to his leadership, and its future graduates will owe a debt to him, as will future graduates of the many programs which have come to be modeled after the Institute.

Rather than expand upon the contributions of Gordon as a professional, I would rather reminisce about Gordon, the man, for as much as I valued my working relationship with him, I treasured our personal relationship. It would be impossible to do justice to the full range of his talents or the many facets of his personality, so I will restrict myself to three aspects that were of particular salience.

Gordon was probably the single most caring, compassionate person that I have known, and the generosity of his spirit was boundless. I will never forget when I first came to Adelphi and, in the first few months, required some minor surgery. Because I hardly knew anyone, and the condition was not serious, I did not expect to receive much attention. The first night that I was in the hospital the phone rang; it was Gordon, and after wishing me well, he went on to talk about some of the myriad things with which he was involved. After the conversation, I felt supported, pleased that he had taken so much time for me, and very grateful for this nice gesture. I was wrong. When he called again on the second and third nights, I realized that it was not a gesture at all, but a spontaneous expression of his genuine feelings. Over the years I don't know how many times I saw this repeated, as he always made the time to make difficult phone calls or write compassionate notes to friends experiencing personal troubles. I have never known a person with such an unerring knack for saying the right thing at the right time.

Perhaps his sensitivity to the plight of others was honed by his own delicate health, or the precarious condition of his beloved son, Kurt. This may be so, but he never imposed those difficulties on others, and my second memory concerns the zest with which he lived, the endless curiosity he displayed, and the enthusiasm he brought to all his undertakings. I always marvelled, as I persisted in overprotecting and sheltering my own children, at how he would leap from one seeming precipice to another, bringing the joy of life to all he touched. He found simple delight everywhere, in a fine meal, a creative performance, a native ceremony, conversation with literally hundreds of friends. Nobody brought as much truth to the platitude about living life to the fullest, and his contagious enthusiasm contributed to his being a memorable companion. It is rare for me to travel anywhere, identify myself as being from Adelphi, and not hear a fond anecdote about Gordon.

This being the case, the third aspect that I recall may seem contradictory, but it concerns his family, about whom his life revolved. His relationship with Margaret was unique; he quickly made Ellen a daughter, and his feelings for Kurt were extraordinary. He valued loyalty above all, and offered it to those he befriended. He easily resolved the apparent paradox of family focus and wide-spread interests by converting others into family and, indeed, the most special aspect of the Institute is its family-like quality. In times of need, such as this past week, there was a mutual concern and support that nurtured all of its members. The feelings that exist within an organization derive from its leader, and Gordon generated warmth and concern wherever he went.

I would like to close with a digression and quotation. I have always been struck by some of the commonalities between Gordon and one of my boyhood heroes, Jackie Robinson, and I think Gordon would have enjoyed the comparison with a man he also admired. They were both pioneers, charismatic figures who came to be larger than life and symbolized their causes. They both were widely appreciated by people who shared their cause, but abused by its opponents. They both had health problems which led to them being taken from us before their time, but left an unforgettable legacy behind. Roger Kahn, in eulogizing Jackie Robinson, spoke words that also fit Gordon Derner. He said, "He did not merely play at center stage. He was center stage, and wherever he walked, center stage walked with him." The Institute has lost its center stage, but we owe it to Gordon, in order to validate his wisdom and honor his memory, to develop the best damn repertory company that we can.

George Stricker

It is still hard for me to believe that Gordon Derner died. Gordon was a most unique person because he believed in his dreams... He would allow nothing, and often no one, to stand in his way. Here was a man whose wishes, whose personal vision alone directed him. It was with this passionate inner vision that he forced the world to accommodate itself to him. Whether he was pushing himself, in spite of his illness, whether travelling with Margaret and Kurt, around the world, telling Ellen to get a Ph.D., or giving birth to the Institute...There was Gordon, always trying to force the world, reality, to accommodate to him, one more time. His death was shocking because we never expected the world to beat him--it rarely had--and we expected him to continue to be our hero.

One of the things that I personally admired about Gordon was his openness and his publicness. That he did not need to hide his flaws, his boibles, and his problems; with him, it was all present. Gordon's problems, his unconscious and his humanity were as visible as his cowboy boots. Because of the presence of his unconscious, we all attached our unconscious' to him--often seeing him as a father--to love, to emulate, to fight, and to hate--With Gordon, we all had a primary relationship of great emotional intensity and turmoil and passion.

Gordon was basically a populist. This probably came from growing up without advantages and identifying with the outsiders,