George Weinberg (1935- )

Jack Nichols

George Weinberg, PhD, coined the term *homophobia*. In the mid-1960s, at a time when most other members of his profession were classifying homosexuality as a malfunction, Weinberg, who self-identified as a heterosexual, was passionately and publicly proclaiming them mistaken. In the process of defining homophobia, he proffered a radical concept: healthy homosexuality. Only one of a handful of psychotherapists who were willing to take such a stand, Weinberg gave unrelenting assistance to the East Coast’s pioneering gay and lesbian activists. A lover of poetry, especially Shakespeare, he used his forceful literary and speaking talents on behalf of gay and lesbian liberation.

In September 1965, addressing the second annual ECHO conference (East Coast Homophile Organizations), Weinberg critiqued his professional peers, bemoaning among other cruel therapies electroshock treatments. In 1969, without bothering to identify himself as a heterosexual male, he began writing regularly for *GAY*, America’s first gay weekly. In 1972 St. Martin’s Press published Weinberg’s groundbreaking work, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. This book, which for the first time explained his conception of homophobia, began with a direct statement that sent shock waves through the memberships of both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association: “I would never consider a patient healthy,” he wrote, “unless he had overcome his prejudice against homosexuality” (1972, p. 1).

George Weinberg was born in 1935 in New York City and was raised entirely by his mother, Lillian, who had only a seventh-grade education. She taught herself shorthand and typing, however, and secured employment as an assistant to a well-known lawyer, Harold Riegelman, regarded by her son as his godfather. Riegelman rose to prominence in the Empire City’s Republican circles with the assistance of Lillian, who wrote speeches for him dur-
ing a period when he ran unsuccessfully for mayor. Weinberg met his actual father only briefly and for the first time when he was eighteen.

It was Lillian, however, whose advice to her son set a standard by which he would thereafter appraise all people he knew: “The way to judge someone,” she said, “is by how he or she treats the least important person in his life.” Weinberg’s childhood, in spite of Lillian’s loving care, became a turbulent period. He was diagnosed as “emotionally disturbed” by the New York City public school system. Lillian scrimped and saved in order to place him in the Riverside School, a private facility where he enjoyed the attention of first-rate educators (Nichols, 2000).

There, his prodigious success in mathematics gave him a sense of sanity that was bolstered by his enjoyment of classical literature and history. Not being wealthy by his classmates’ standards, however, the young student found himself excluded from their social gatherings in the countryside. He spent his afternoons on New York City streets, making friendships on his own, choosing companions based not on their social stations but on their characters. Although initially he felt like an outsider, his solace was summed up for him as he self-identified with Marcellus in a verse by Alexander Pope:

More true joy Marcellus, exiled, feels
Than Caesar with a senate at his heels

As an exiled youth, George Weinberg looked on the brighter side. He enjoyed that he didn’t have to wear jackets and ties. Most of his friends in high school, he was later to discover, were gay, although neither he nor they themselves had yet realized it. In his 1996 foreword to my book, The Gay Agenda, Weinberg recalled his fond remembrances of those gay high school chums, reflecting the kind of warmth and enthusiasm he’d learned to bring to his same-sex friendships. “I valued these friends,” he explained, “for their encompassing, loving vision of literature, their gentleness of spirit, their subtlety.”

“Eventually,” he said, “a few disclosed to me what they had considered the dark truth of their not being ‘like others,’ like me. It was difficult for them to reveal their notion that they did not draw their passions from a common spring.”

Weinberg, in one of his typical flights of masterly prose, sounded a clarion call to embrace what society had denied. “Society,” he said, had been failing to “recognize that passion is its only excuse for being and that all love is conspiratorial and deviant and magical. The ‘mainstream’ could not accept that isolation is universal, as is every individual’s desire to bridge it
with love and truth. In this sense we are all the same” (Clarke and Nichols, 1986, p. 13).

By the time his high school friends had confided in him, however, George Weinberg had already become a psychotherapist with a doctorate in clinical psychology from Columbia University. He’d also earned a master’s degree in English literature from New York University. At Columbia he’d noted with alarm how psychologists were being taught to instill conservative values. Their aim, he decided, was to make people conform “to the most homogenous, controlling standard” (Nichols, 2000).

More specifically, educators had taught him to treat gay men and lesbians as though they were inherently sick, and he recalled how many of his colleagues “were so phobic about gays that it even seemed reasonable to torture homosexuals if this would ‘cure’ them.” Such attitudes found the young doctor “tormented” by his profession’s showy blindness to injustice. He began, he indicated to me, by trying gently to change their perspectives. He introduced them to gay male friends. Although his psychoanalytic colleagues liked gay men and lesbians as long as they thought them to be heterosexuals, the very news that Weinberg had, by design, introduced them without first outing his gay friends elicited their extreme disgust, and, recalled Weinberg, his experiment had “had no effect on their views. They simply reversed their fondness for those individuals they had liked. They insisted on their repugnance and on despising homosexuals, calling them mentally disturbed, and shunning them” (Nichols, 2000).

Summing up their behavior in clinical terms, Weinberg made his diagnosis: “Clearly this was a phobic attitude.” In 1967, he began calling them homophobes, labeling their behavior homophobic. Once the youthful outsider, he sympathized now with society’s outcasts: “It was hard to enjoy being one of the chosen people, ‘the hetero,’ when so many people whom I admired were not invited to the party” (Nichols, 2000).

One of the people he most admired—his lifelong mentor, in fact, about whom he would later write two books—was William Shakespeare. George Weinberg had not been the first scholar who had concluded after conducting prodigious studies that Shakespeare was gay. This conclusion furthered the young psychotherapist’s determination to do his part to eliminate antigay prejudices. He said “I felt terrible for Shakespeare, my hero, when, in a sonnet, the poet begged an unnamed lover not to mourn for him too openly after he died”:

Lest the wide world should look into your moan  
And mock you with me after I am gone.
“Clearly,” Weinberg argued, “Shakespeare was speaking to a gay lover. No one would have mocked a woman for mourning a man. I was outraged that even the greatest of all writers had lived in fear because of his unpopular preference. Love is love, after all” (Nichols, 2000).

George Weinberg became infuriated by the difficulties he witnessed as experienced by his gay male friends. He was quite certain about his own heterosexual inclination but also empathetic enough to see that his friends felt equally decisive about their own preferences. "Most of them confessed that they lived so alone," he recalled, "so hopelessly, feeling so unwanted" (Nichols, 2000).

That they had not even trusted him enough to confide in him gnawed away at him, expanding at the same time his awareness of how repressive were his peers' insecure claims about sexual propriety. He noted that on the question of same-sex love and affection they were moving in sheeplike formations and wandering outside any known field of scientific credibility.

Before opening a private practice, Weinberg pursued a doctorate in mathematics at the Courant Institute at New York University. Eventually, however, he decided that he'd be happier in a profession that did not isolate him in the way that mathematics seemed to promise. While attending City College, he suspected that some of his English teachers might be gay, those who had awakened his consciousness to a wealth of literature. After coming out to him, his gay male friends found themselves drawn closer to George than before. It soon became clear to them that he wasn't judgmental—not would he have been judgmental toward lesbians, had he known any personally in those poststudent days. He worried about his male friends' safety, however, especially about "the beatings and blackmailings," which were taken for granted by most upright citizens as an expected price for being openly gay.

Weinberg's friend, Nelson W., told him how a sailor had pulled a knife on him in a hotel room and how the young man had successfully escaped through the window onto a ledge, teetering many stories above the pavement before reaching safety. Other commonplace instances of antigay prejudice were never thereafter lost on Weinberg. He was infuriated when he saw how "even the families of homosexual men disowned them, disenfranchised them" (Nichols, 2000).

On September 26, 1965, at New York's Barbizon Hotel, Weinberg delivered a scathing critique of the ideologically inspired misbehavior of his own profession. He had bravely come forward to address activists at the second East Coast gay and lesbian conference, which had taken place prior to the movement's first national conference the following year. In his clear, unmistakable style, Weinberg's speech, titled "The Dangers of Psychoanalysis," regaled that early assemblage with reflections on the blind spots that had afflicted members of his profession. "With the aid of pseudoscientific litera-
ture, superadded to our early cultural bias to loathe the homosexual, too
many of us are able to take his time and money while treating him as de-
ranged, without any evidence that he is (The Homosexual Citizen, 1966,
p. 5).

Only during the spring and summer of 1965 had two major gay move-
ment organizations first passed policy statements directly challenging the
ideologies of the psychiatric and psychological professions when, nearly si-
multaneously, Weinberg said:

As a beginning therapist working under a supervisor, my immediate
instructions were clear: to regard the homosexual’s behavior as a
symptom of lurking disease and not to consider him cured until his
pathological taste was changed. To say the least, it is hard for anyone
who is concerned about people to ask someone to give up what counts
most to him, for no apparent reason except to escape public condem-
nation—a price which every homosexual implicitly understands better
than his therapist could ever explain it to him. The request is espe-
cially hard to make when, as with the homosexual, there is nothing
even vaguely commensurate to promise him in return. (The Homosex-
ual Citizen, 1966, p. 5)

The prejudices Weinberg saw manifesting in his colleagues and reflected
in social register etiquette found him remembering the early 1950s and
scornfully hurling cultural critiques that would become useful to his 1965
gay activist audience:

When I was a graduate student in clinical psychology, in the early fif-
ties, sex was hardly discussed at all. I don’t remember being assigned
a single reading from Kinsey’s work, though he was already famous
and ours was a research-oriented department. The attitude toward all
sexual behavior was as embarrassed as in the average American home.
Toward the homosexual it was the current “enlightened” one: “Don’t
laugh at him but pity him because he is sick.” This attitude, by the way,
has begun (in 1965) to replace American-Gothic contempt, for the
simple reason that it brings its own reward, the feeling of being con-
siderate and sage, in contrast with some imaginary bigoted group,
hostile to the homosexual. (The Homosexual Citizen, 1966, p. 4)

In 1969 I met Weinberg shortly after Lige Clarke and I began editing
GAY. Our friendship grew steadily because of the mutual love we shared for
literature and for useful values we had discovered in certain poems. We har-
bled similar hopes, an expansion of human happiness among them. On
lazy summer afternoons we would introduce each other to our favorite passages in the works of both Shakespeare and Walt Whitman, often swimming in a spectacular hillside pool at the home of Weinberg’s colleague and friend, Dr. Clarence Tripp. Tripp was busily writing his scholarly tome, *The Homosexual Matrix*.

Weinberg’s regular essays in *GAY* became increasingly and stridently critical of antigay psychiatric and psychological theories. He began, in these essays, to describe the causes of homophobia. But he also wrote to encourage the ranks of the newly formed militant New York Gay Activists Alliance. In 1972, his groundbreaking statement on homophobia, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, was published. Author Merle Miller noted at the time that not only could Weinberg write expertly but that he had something to say to gays and straights alike. Feminist author Germaine Greer wholeheartedly praised Weinberg’s pioneering views. Thane Hampton, among *GAY*s most sophisticated writers, gave his immediate reaction to Weinberg’s revolutionary manifesto: “I would like to share a subjective but nonetheless valid historic pronouncement with you. Dr. George Weinberg’s *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* is by far the best book ever written about homosexuality.”

Hampton noted how we gays are enormously fortunate that George Weinberg is also here to stay. He is probably the greatest ally we have ever had, and we owe him our loyalty and support... Some of us may even owe him our lives.” Philosopher Arthur Evans, author of the monumental *Critique of Patriarchal Reason* (1997) and a 1969 founding member of New York’s Gay Activists Alliance, recalls Weinberg’s influence at the time:

> It was clear to those of us who were GAA activists that George was a compassionate and far-sighted soul, that he had uncommon common sense. I remember how he encouraged and mentored our militant organization at a time when most people in the professions thought we were crazy. He knew that it was the system that was out of kilter. He wasn’t afraid to tell his colleagues so, but in a way that even his most intransigent critics could hear. You don’t often find that combination of verve and balance in the same person. (Evans, 2000)

Over lunch one day, Weinberg introduced Lige Clarke and me to his book publisher. A year later, as a result of that meeting, Clarke and I became the authors of the first nonfiction memoir by a male couple. In our acknowledgments to those who’d encouraged us to write and who’d broadened our horizons, George Weinberg’s name was listed first for having suggested the book itself. Our title was *I Have More Fun with You Than Anybody* and we described “those welcome summer afternoons” spent swimming in com-
pany with George Weinberg and his lady friend. In a nutshell, we described his indefatigable desire to end preventable sufferings. We told how each member of our little group had relaxed in our own ways around the swimming pool, but observed how it was George whose time was doggedly devoted to the welfare of tiny struggling creatures: “George, kindly soul that he is, picks drowning insects out of the pool.”

There were a number of occasions when George Weinberg and I appeared together in New York media, each of us so comfortable with the gay topic and with each other as friends that our more serious themes of homosexual rights often became occasions for happy-go-lucky exchanges, punctured by Weinberg’s good-natured laughter. Shortly following the publication of *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, Weinberg decided to throw a grand party in his large Central Park apartment. It was to honor four of his gay and lesbian friends who’d seen their own co-authored books published. Lige Clarke and I were one of the duos while Kay Tobin Lahusen and Randolfe Wicker, co-authors of *The Gay Crusaders*, were the other.

The interviewees in *The Gay Crusaders*—those who had most helped to shape nationwide activist strategies—were mostly all present too, including Frank Kameny, Marty Robinson, Arthur Evans, Barbara Gittings, Craig Rodwell, Jim Owles, Lige Clarke, and me. George had, by this time, developed vibrant friendships with several lesbian movement pioneers, including Lilli Vincenz, Barbara Gittings, and Kay Tobin Lahusen. On this special occasion, he allowed his guests of honor to invite a hundred comrades each. The party became a *Who’s Who* of the gay liberation movement on America’s East Coast. Attendees also included famous New York City artist-provocateurs. Andy Warhol’s superstars, Jackie Curtis and Candy Darling, arrived fashionably late in the company of Vicki Richman, a brilliant transvestite columnist for *GAY*.

The latter part of the 1970s found the good doctor maintaining a steady but deliberately small therapy practice; he also devoted himself to his real love, writing. Earlier he proved to himself that it was possible for him to get published in the largest of the mainstream publications, including *Reader’s Digest* and *TV Guide*. Now he began offering, in a series of books, unique insights into consciousness, designed to be of help to the many and not just to a limited few. He had begun this line of work much earlier when he wrote his second book, *The Activist Approach*, bringing the influence of American psychologist William James to bear on his approach to therapy. Weinberg’s first book had been, literally, a textbook about psychology and statistics, one in which his mathematical insights had come into play.

Now, however, he aimed at a popular market, and in 1978 his *Self Creation*, a colloquial self-control manual, was selected by both the Psychology Today Book Club and the Book-of-the-Month Club, clearly demonstrating
his appeal to a self-help–conscious mass audience. It was translated and published in fourteen languages.

George Weinberg was particularly busy during the 1980s and 1990s unveiling a series of books on his visions of human potentialities. One of his major works, *The Pliant Animal: Understanding the Greatest Human Asset*, emphasized what he knew about the strengths inherent in our species’ elasticity. He wrote:

Far from being a creature who cannot change, the human being has incredible pliancy . . . to study sameness with the intention of classifying people as like or unlike one another is to set one’s sights on seeing how we do not change. Yet this is essentially what psychology has done. (Weinberg, 1981, p. 233)

Next published was a 1984 overview of his profession, *The Heart of Psychotherapy: A Journey into the Mind and Office of a Therapist at Work*. Scouring traditional ways therapists often approached their patients, his criticisms exposed practices he thought of as little more than hocus-pocus. He deplored signs of greed among psychologists wherever he saw them. I was once witness to his unhappiness at finding that a small hourly fee he’d charged to tutor a student-therapist was being exceeded by the high fees that same student was already charging his new patients.

Among some of the more significant approaches to a pleasured life that George Weinberg and I agreed upon, I think, pertained to beauty. In his introduction to a second book Lige and I wrote, he zeroed in on advice we’d given about approaching new relationships. “I like them especially,” he said of us, “when they are rebutting the criteria of physical beauty according to which all but one in ten-thousand is ugly.” Within this context Weinberg offered his own challenging but characteristic perspective that “the art of life consists largely in the ability to see beauty, to remain open to beauty, for nature never tires of showing it to us in new forms” (Clarke and Nichols, 1974, p. xiii).

In 1990, with the publication of *The Taboo Scarf*, George Weinberg offered his readers dramatic tales from his experience as a therapist, altering patient histories to make them unrecognizable, but describing their progress in unforgettable terms. A *New York Times* (November 18, 1990) reviewer found in this book “complex investigations of a master sleuth searching for the demon within, the repressed evil, the killer of the psyche.”

Brian L. Weiss, MD, chair of the Department of Psychiatry at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami, characterized *The Taboo Scarf* as a “rare treasure” in which readers “become the therapist and the patient,” learning about themselves in the process (Weiss, 1990).
In the same vein as The Taboo Scarf, Weinberg wrote Nearer to the Heart's Desire, more tales from therapy, his title borrowed from a haunting verse in The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. This particular verse seems somehow best to capture George Weinberg's deep passion to act:

Ah, love, could you and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits?
And then remold it nearer to the heart's desire?

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Columns

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