

Larry Hollingsworth Strasburger, MD: Twenty-Seventh President of The American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law

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On an October afternoon in New England, light from an autumn sun illuminates the interior landscape of Dr. Larry Hollingsworth Strasburger's office and study. It is in this office that he began to practice general psychiatry and psychoanalysis in 1970 and later began his practice of forensic psychiatry. The light shows off a work space that is as personal as it is diverse. On the mantel is a pen and ink drawing of a rabbi. This religious man's likeness resides next to a small Buddha and a small icon of Mother Mary and Jesus. Across the room, keeping these three company are several watercolors of the sea. The books that line much of the wall of this large study are also drawn from the different points of the compass. Winnecott keeps company with Cleckley, Hare, and A. A. Milne. The room's diversity has organization in only the very loosest sense. There is clutter, too. A visitor, surrounded by this rambling interior structure, feels a sense of tolerance and warmth.

In 1970, when Dr. Strasburger began to work in this room, he had finished his training in general psychiatry and was in that sometimes interminable process of training to be a psychoanalyst. He also practiced at McLean Hospital, up the road and over

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the hill from his Belmont home. Dr. John Nemiah, a former teacher of Dr. Strasburger from the psychiatry residency at Massachusetts General Hospital, lived on the property abutting the Strasburgers'. John would later become Chief of Psychiatry at Beth Israel Hospital and editor of *The American Journal of Psychiatry*. From the office window, one can see what remains of a vineyard that marked the property line between the Strasburgers' and the Nemiahs' homes. Something so rural seems almost out of place in a

backyard from which one can also see the Boston skyline.

In the psychiatry of 2002, our discipline has become more structured and specialized. Forensic psychiatry is a duly recognized subspecialty with approved fellowships that provide formal curricula, training, and a pathway to certification. Psychiatry trainees must deliberately choose whether to become forensic psychiatrists, often making that decision in their second or third year of residency. We forget that it was not always this way. Not long ago, forensic psychiatry was learned after training, not as a formal part of the training process itself. In those days, a psychiatrist might recognize a nascent interest, perhaps a serendipitous byproduct of one's practice. The daily practice of medicine could create seed crystals of interest that could in turn precipitate a change in career. It happened that way for Dr. Strasburger.

I first met him in 1981 when he was the lecturer for the legal aspects of general psychiatry in a McLean Hospital Board Review Course. We students were prepared to hear a dry recitation of facts to prepare us for that section of the written part of the Psychiatry Board Examination. In a talk that is still clear in my mind now, 22 years later, Dr. Strasburger began his lecture not didactically, but with an intensely personal story from an earlier time in his own practice. He had been a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy, having been drafted at the end of a fellowship in community psychiatry. Two years later he was 33 and nearing the end of his term of military service. I have asked him to retell the story he had once told in that lecture:

It was a pivotal point for my career. I had been asked to evaluate a man who had been sent back from Vietnam where he had stood court-martial. He was a Marine who, while on guard duty, had been drinking a Coke. While he was distracted, a nearby Vietnamese boy grabbed the cola and ran. He saw the boy escaping with his drink and shot the boy dead on the spot. At his court-martial, a senior Navy psychiatrist testified that a person would have to be crazy to behave like that, and the court accepted the opinion as evidence of lack of criminal responsibility. I thought the Marine was a psychopath. I was angry at what I considered a miscarriage of justice and wanted to do something. My commanding officer suggested that I do some reading about criminal responsibility. It both fostered my interest and also kept me from blowing up where it wouldn't have helped.

It seemed remarkable to me, even in 1981, that a lecturer before a nervous group of young psychiatrists would be self-revelatory and compelling instead of spooning out facts. There was no question that he

had gotten our attention. His narrative had made him and, by extension, his subject of forensic psychiatry, accessible. As he proceeded with his lecture, he moved from personal experience to talking about criminal responsibility and then about competence. These many years later, I can recall his saying, "When someone asks you if a patient is competent, the question you should have in your mind is, competent for what?" He had lowered the group's anxiety level. Rather than leaving us feeling diminished beside his considerably greater knowledge, he fostered the idea that we could join him in his pursuit of clarity.

In 1970, his two years in the military completed, he returned to Belmont, Massachusetts, to his outpatient practice as a general psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in training, to being a part-time academic at Harvard and an inpatient psychiatrist in charge of a unit at McLean Hospital. Dr. Strasburger's interest in forensic psychiatry had begun with the help of chance. A few more similar events would consolidate the altered trajectory of his career. Chance soon presented another forensic opportunity. He was approached by a then attorney, now The Honorable Judge David Mazonne, whom I called to ask about his memory of the case and of Dr. Strasburger:

It was over 25 years ago. I needed help. I had been assigned to defend a sex offender case of some political sensitivity. The defendant had been denied release several times before. It was a loser of a case but he [Dr. Strasburger] made it a winner. He called it like he saw it. He was no expert for hire. He persuaded a very tough judge. I cannot tell you how impressed I was with him. My client was released and led a fruitful, productive life. He never reoffended. And we did the right thing.

Soon after this case, Dr. Strasburger was invited to consult at Bridgewater State Hospital. McLean Hospital had a contract to provide services to The Sexual Offender Unit which, although in a state hospital, was in fact under the auspices of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections.

Dr. Strasburger was a general psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who had been trained to analyze symptoms rooted in conflicted feelings and fantasies. Now he was traveling 30 miles south of Belmont to talk with men who had illegally acted out their feelings and fantasies. His practice and career were in the process of being altered: "There weren't many people in Boston who were willing to see this population. I learned a lot about sexual psychopaths. I learned that actions sometimes spoke louder than words. The work stirred up strong feelings."

On that note, I asked him about the contrast between the comparatively genteel nature of his training and practice and the attraction to work he had done at Bridgewater:

They were an off-putting crowd but different from my psychotherapy and analytic practice. George Valliant once wrote that sitting with a psychopath is like being in an elevator with someone who has a strong cigar. With some, I could sense their frustration, their inadequacy, their lack of social skills, and in some cases their regret for not having had it more together.

It was also permission for an interest in the macabre that is mostly kept under wraps.

His curiosity and tolerance come to the fore:

It was a puzzle: How could this person come to do what he had done? There is a side of my character that's expressed in hunting and Sherlock Holmes. I also once got most of the way to a black belt in Tae Kwan Do. For lack of a better word, I guess you could say that early work at Bridgewater was another sublimation.

I thought that testifying also seemed to conflict with his clinical attitudes of curiosity and tolerance. "And what about the adversarial part?" I inquired.

It has always been such fun. The production of good testimony has always seemed like a chess game: anticipating the strengths and weaknesses of the other side. I like the game. I like holding onto one's personal ballast. It's easy to get too excited in the midst of the fray. Maintaining one's position in an adversarial system, there is always the potential to overextend one's self. In testimony and in chess, that always creates problems.

I had just been reminded that as a forensic expert, you couldn't be more than you were and you couldn't be better than the facts.

On another day, I am in his office again looking at my surroundings. On the wall and the mantel are photos of his wife taken through the years and individual photos of his children. This personal space greets patients, forensic examinees, and colleagues alike. I ask him about how it had worked out, bringing forensic examinees to a home office. He recalls a story of interviewing someone who was "turning state's evidence" and was brought to his office by two state troopers. One of the troopers was a sharp shooter who proceeded to perch himself on the roof as a lookout for any developing mischief. The other trooper waited on ground level. The examination proceeded, contained within these suburban, wooded surroundings. At the examination's conclusion, the prisoner, leaving with his two police escorts advised his examiner, "Doc, you should get an alarm system, just to be on the safe side." Dr. Strasburger

laughs. I surmise that warmth, curiosity, and interest had prevailed, even under unusual circumstances.

I can see no diplomas anywhere around me. I later found them hanging in the far right hand corner, out of the line of sight of anyone in the room except someone sitting behind the desk. At those times when he is alone in this room and seated at his desk, the paper proof of his credentials are there for him alone to see, in privacy. He jokes, "in case I need reminding that I have them." Self-effacing modesty is a rare quality in high achievers. It can be in short supply among forensic experts whose very job description involves the projection of confidence, certainty, and, sometimes, a degree of self-promotion.

Looking at the diplomas, one sees what a friend of mine from Seattle refers to as a set of those impeccable Eastern credentials: Yale University, Harvard Medical School, a residency at The Massachusetts General Hospital, a certificate from the Boston Psychoanalytic. Yet, there is in Dr. Strasburger a pervasive graciousness that one would not usually associate with the urgency and abruptness of the Northeast.

At 17, I was a Southerner who had been accepted at Yale. So I had to get an overcoat and a new pair of shoes. With those in hand, I made my way to New Haven and immersed myself in the culture shock of the Northeast. The pace was threatening. I had to work harder than I ever had. I had never experienced a competitive academic environment before.

Before this, he had grown up in New Orleans. He had been a scholarship student at a prep school that he described as "nurturing" and "a bastion of progressive education." He remembered the headmaster of the school, a Mr. Ralph Boothby, saying that Larry, having done as well in English and history as he had in science and math, would find his life's work at the intersection of two fields. Dr. Strasburger momentarily shifted back to his story about the Vietnam murder case. "That was the beginning of Mr. Boothby's prediction's coming true."

In the process of getting biographical facts, I again stumble over Dr. Strasburger's modesty. Asking him whether there are particular cases that I should know about, he responds, "There's the Gould case."

I'm a little taken aback. This case set the legal standard for diminished capacity in the state of Massachusetts.¹ Dennis Gould stabbed his girlfriend to death and was charged with and found guilty of murder. The case was appealed to the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts and remanded back for a retrial with wording about how a jury was to be in-

structed about diminished capacity. Dennis Gould was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Dr. Strasburger was the defense forensic psychiatrist.

The topic of diminished capacity has been discussed in the weekly meeting of The Program in Psychiatry and Law at Massachusetts Mental Health Center countless times. Dr. Strasburger is a senior associate of that program. He has always contributed to the discussions. He never felt it necessary to mention, let alone trumpet, that he was the expert on the prevailing side of the sentinel case in our own jurisdiction.

I wanted to interview other informants about his career. Dr. Strasburger has been an important witness and author on the subject of patient-therapist sexual misconduct. This interest, like his interest in forensic psychiatry and diminished capacity, had been in part provoked by personal experience. "A friend had," he paused discreetly, "shall we say been improperly dealt with about sex and boundaries." He and attorney Linda Jorgenson had written a series of articles on legal and clinical issues of therapist-patient sex. In addition to publishing in psychiatric journals, their publications included an extensive article in the *William and Mary Law Review* in 1991.² I called her:

I've known Larry since the early '80s and we've used him repeatedly. He was our expert for the first successful suit for patient-therapist sexual misconduct in the state. In 1989, he was our expert for what was then the largest monetary judgment awarded for therapist sexual misconduct. He's incredibly thorough. He's also really caring about the clients. What makes him so effective is that juries know he's giving it to them straight and not trying to pull something over on them.

That credibility he conveys was apparently not limited to the juries. Linda Jorgenson added, "I've not taken cases if he has said he doesn't think the case can go forward."

In her description of his thoroughness, she had used the phrase, "getting his ducks in a row." She interrupted her own train of thought. "You know he hunts ducks. He's a hunter. He's such a gentle person, you don't really think of him as a hunter."

Marilyn Price, MD, another colleague of the Program in Psychiatry and Law had spoken in one of the program's meetings of a report Dr. Strasburger had written about a man accused of a grisly first-degree murder. The press had had a field day with the gruesome facts of the case. At the time she read the report,

Dr. Price was a trainee and trying to learn about report writing:

It was extraordinary. He wrote a report that anticipated the other side's argument and dealt with it in a masterful way. He looked at why on the surface the facts seemed to support one conclusion, and then, in a systematic and thoughtful way, he explained why a different conclusion was correct. He anticipates both sides and takes in all the evidence that's available. It's kind of like the case is a puzzle that he makes come together, with all the pieces, not just some of them.

Dr. Price continued without prompting, "And his honesty and integrity!" Once an attorney had wanted no report from her because the defendant's MMPI-2 responses strongly suggested malingering. The attorney wanted her testimony only about the interview, unless the issue of the MMPI-2 was discovered on cross-examination. She thought it was unethical, but wanted the opinion of a senior colleague. Dr. Strasburger "just said you cannot write a report or give testimony that ignores the question of malingering. He was so clear," and evidently calming in the storm. She paused, "You know, no one ever has a bad word to say about him. No one."

Her concerns had been addressed so adroitly that it was easy to lose track of the sophistication and the wisdom in the advice. His judgment had simply not been clouded by pressure. He had not preached when he said it. It was that kind of matter-of-fact advice that seems so simple and reassuring once it is said that you wonder where your doubts came from. He had quietly dealt with the greatest challenge to a forensic expert: to strive for objectivity in the midst of a process that is constantly demanding advocacy at any cost.

In 1998 he was the lead author of "On Wearing Two Hats: Role Conflict in Serving Both as Psychotherapist and Expert Witness," an article for which he received The Manfred S. Guttmacher Award for the year's outstanding contribution to the forensic psychiatry literature.³ Clinical and forensic psychiatric perspectives are uneasy bedfellows. The article clarifies the underlying role conflicts for one individual who would try to perform both functions for the same patient examinee. It elaborates each position, clinical and forensic, from its subjective best and then underscores the conflicts in mission and method. The result was that the consciousness of the profession was raised about a situation in which a professional would have irreconcilable, conflicting duties. The prevailing standard of practice in forensic psy-

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chiatry was changed. In the article, as in the remainder of his career, Dr. Strasburger has demonstrated an intellectual curiosity and tolerance of legitimate differences and, ultimately, a synthesis that was both instructive and pragmatic.

His career and breadth of knowledge offer a counterpoint to the current trend toward subspecialization in forensic psychiatry. He has been the forensic expert for the case that set the standard for diminished capacity in Massachusetts. He has defined an acceptable boundary between clinical and forensic job descriptions. He has been one of the leading authors and experts about therapist boundary violations. He has written on subjects as diverse as suicide and divorce in the elderly, juvenile transfer procedure, countertransference to psychopaths, and the emotional risks to litigants. He has served as the Counselor, Treasurer, and Vice President of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (AAPL) and now will serve as President.

He has continued his practice of general psychiatry, seeing it as the foundation of his forensic work, not an interference. In that regard, he has never left his psychodynamic roots and his clinical foundation. There is a message in the trajectory of his career for all of us in the AAPL. It provides a counterpoint to the trend of our knowing more and more about less and less. In lieu of continued subspecialization, we should consider the benefits of generalism.

I return to his office. It is winter. The ground is frozen. In midafternoon the shadows are already long. I pause in the waiting room for a moment and notice that on the table is an electric pot for making tea and beside it, a puzzle composed of wrought iron polygons: a D-shaped ring interlocked with a heart shape. He had told me, "The object is to free the heart! It's like psychotherapy." Although visually it seemed impossible, I had seen him unhinge and then reconnect these two pieces, only to find myself un-

able to replicate the solution. I am reminded of Dr. Price's comment that his report was like someone's taking all the pieces of the puzzle and having them come together.

Through the waiting room and back in the office again, I am reminded of the seemingly disparate pieces of Dr. Strasburger's own life's puzzle that he has brought together. Southern graciousness and Northeastern competitiveness. Clinical compassion and forensic clarity. Tolerance of what cannot be understood and incisiveness about what can be. An enormous breadth of knowledge and judgment and a sense of humility about what has not been learned. Holding these many disparate pieces together is the matrix of his repeatedly saying he feels lucky to have known the people he has met or to have done what he has done. His focus on his feeling lucky, his feeling that he has been the one who has received, belies the profound effect he has had on those of us who have been lucky enough to know him. His knowledge, wisdom, modesty, and encouragement have brought all of us closer to what we privately hope we might have the potential to be. His feeling lucky about being with us has facilitated our making more and better of ourselves. We feel more secure, more confident, a little happier and, yes, lucky at the thought that so fine an individual as Dr. Strasburger could feel lucky to know us. Having him as its President is indeed AAPL's good fortune.

Acknowledgment

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Reference

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