HILDEGARD E. PEPLAU: LEADER, PRACTITIONER, ACADEMICIAN, SCHOLAR, AND THEORIST

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by Grayce M. Sills

Allow me to take some of you back in memory and for others to, perhaps, acquaint you with the psychiatric nursing scene in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The mentally ill were, by and large, hospitalized in huge mental hospitals. It seemed then that to be bigger in size was equated with better. I was "proud" then that my state hospital training school was in one of the largest hospitals of its kind in the world, albeit that this was the same hospital so devastating documented in a thinly veiled work of fiction, Snake Pit, but in truth was largely fact.

Recall with me that these were the days before the introduction of psychotropic drugs. These were the days of the "Scotch douches," the wet packs, continuous tubs, full sheet restraints, B & C mixture, paraldehyde, and leather cuffs. The preoccupation of nursing staff often seemed largely to be with the prevention of suicide and, God forgive us, what indignities were visited on patients in the name of protecting them from their suicidal impulses. No eyeglasses, no shoelaces, no belts, no dentures, no toothbrushes, no combs, no mirrors, no silverware, or, at best, a spoon - with all spoons counted before the dining room could be emptied of its weary bodies that were then to be lined up to march back to the ward, back to the "section" where it surely would be time to pass the paraldehyde bottle and the tin cup. Recall the sweaty smell of deep coma insulin treatment and the slightly acrid odor accompanying fifty electric shock treatments given in the same room, with no anesthesia, and all over in an hour-and-a-half or less. Recall the "ice-pick" leucotomies, with thirty to fifty done in a single morning, and the nursing staff left in the wake of the visiting neurosurgeons to habilitate the now vegetable-like patient.

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If I have succeeded in evoking the feeling of that era of the state mental hospital, then you will know why, when I reread Mary Jane Ward's telling portrayal of life inside those walls, I was again reminded of the large debt I owe Hildegard E. Peplau for bringing me a new perspective, a new approach, a theoretically based foundation for nursing practice, for therapeutic work with patients in those problematic settings.

Imagine the excitement of making sense out of a patient's hallucinatory experience through collaborative work! imagine the joy that came from discovering that a delusion could be dealt with and satisfactorily eliminated through effective verbal work with patients. A new day had downed! theory was used to guide nursing practicing. theory was tested in the real world of practice, remember, this was twenty years before there was an NLN accreditation standard that required some conceptual framework should frame the curriculum in schools of nursing.