On Writing Well
A Tribute to Two Mentors

This editorial is a tribute to the two mentors who have been the most influential in my career as author, editor, and psychiatric nurse—Hildegard E. Peplau and William Zinsser. Most of our Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services readers certainly are familiar with Dr. Peplau, yet they may not have heard of William Zinsser.

WILLIAM ZINSSER
Thelma Schorr, Editor of the American Journal of Nursing in the 1970s, introduced nurse editors to Zinsser in 1983 at a meeting of the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) held in New York City. He had just published the second edition of On Writing Well (Zinsser, 1983). After presenting a formal lecture on editors and editing, he engaged in a lively dialogue about writing and editing, addressing the similarities and differences between the two. He ended this session with: “Some editors can also write; some can’t. Know who you are” (Smoyak, 2004, p. 4).

Of course, these were the days before e-mail, so to get a quick response to a question, the telephone was the only choice. Zinsser did answer me when I phoned him several times after the INANE meeting. I had sent a snail mail article to him, which I had written, asking for his critique. His response was quick and brief: “I know who you are, and I think you know who you are—both editor and writer.” I wish I had taped that message, but it is definitely seared in my head.

William Zinsser just died, at the age of 92 (Martin, 2015).

Martin (2015) notes Zinsser used “his own literary craftsmanship to urge clarity, simplicity, brevity and humanity” (para. 1). Among the points he had made to the nurse editors were: “Use the shortest words. ‘Use’ is better than ‘usage.’ Use the fewest syllables. Aim at monosyllables” (W. Zinsser, personal communication, June 1983). When I am presenting workshops on “Writing for Publishing,” I rely on many of Zinsser’s statements. I encourage potential authors to use his latest edition, which includes sections on word processors, demographic trends, and the need to pay attention to culture. Before On Writing Well (Zinsser, 1983), the other classic was Strunk and White’s (1979) The Elements of Style.

Martin (2015) also notes: “His advice was straightforward. Write clearly. Guard the message with your life. Avoid jargon and big words. Use active verbs. Make the reader think you enjoyed writing the piece” (para. 10). At the INANE meeting, when one of the nurses asked Zinsser his thoughts about punctuation, he grinned broadly and said. “I like periods. Many writers don’t get there soon enough.”

Another mentor I want to mention is Donald C. Wolfe, a teacher at the Perth Amboy High School, Perth Amboy, New Jersey. I served as Editor of the school newspaper, the Periscope, and edited the graduation book. When I told him that I wanted to be a journalist, he said: “But you are a girl; no one hires girls as cub reporters. Go get a career first—be something—then you can write.” Zinsser also started out working on his school paper, as Editor. In the old days, editors got to smell printer’s ink because publishing was mainly in-house for small papers. Martin (2015) notes that Zinsser was “intoxicated” (para. 17) by its smell.

HILDEGARD E. PEPLAU
Dr. Peplau was recruited to come to the Rutgers College of Nursing by its first Dean, Ella V. Stonsby, in 1955.
She was hired to design and build a graduate program for psychiatric nursing, with an exclusive focus on clinical work. This program was the first in the country; other master’s programs had foci of administration or education. Beyond her work on the graduate program, Peplau also taught some undergraduate courses. In 1956, I was a student in her class where the topic was learning how to teach families, patients, and others. Each week, we had to write a 1-page paper. There were approximately 35 students in the class, and Peplau provided written feedback to each one of us, each week, on every paper. Sometimes her comments were longer than our original papers. I was a junior, and had never encountered such a teacher. I immediately knew that I had much more to learn from her, and she was very willing to teach.

Barbara J. Callaway (2002) captured Peplau’s work in an excellent biography, *Hildegard Peplau: Psychiatric Nurse of the Century*. To write this book, Callaway visited Peplau every morning at her home and recorded memories and stories. I helped Callaway find and visit professional colleagues from years past, to gather historical data about Peplau’s early days.

The biography has chapters dedicated to how Peplau managed to get to college, her being a nurse in World War II, the birth of her daughter, Letitia Anne Peplau, and various academic nightmares, which resulted from her refusing to work with mediocrity and less-than-stellar clinical teaching. Several chapters are dedicated to her traveling coast to coast each summer, for 20 years, conducting workshops in psychiatric hospitals with staff nurses and collegiate faculty. When she retired from Rutgers, she traveled to Belgium to start graduate programs in psychiatric nursing.

Throughout her career, she was very involved with professional nursing. She served both as the Executive Director and then President of the American Nurses’ Association. She held many consultant positions with the federal government, and worked with officials in the National Institute of Mental Health, designing policies for funding graduate work.

Her habit of providing thorough written comments on the work of students and junior faculty continued both at Rutgers and as students and colleagues sought her advice throughout the years. At first, she used lined yellow pads, wrote numbers on the papers, and then listed these numbers and comments on the lined yellow sheets. For a 10-page paper, it was not unusual for her to provide 30 or more comments. When sticky pads were invented, she switched to these, pasting the comments on the papers. She also engaged in endless telephone contacts.

Peplau is perhaps best known and highly valued for her teaching style, which included, as demonstrations, interviewing patients on wards of psychiatric hospitals, having a student tape record or hand-record the session to be used later to analyze what was said, how it was said, and how the patient interacted. Her emphasis was more on the nurses’ words and actions than the patients’. Often, as I traveled with her in her cross-country summer work, the staff would provide the “most difficult” or “most dangerous” patient for the demonstration. Peplau never objected which never ceased to amaze the staff. This is how she persuaded nurses to become active participants with patients, rather than attending to medications or paperwork.

CONCLUSION

Peplau and Zinsser never knew each other. They were, however, very much alike in what they believed and how they valued accurate communication.

Their focus was on “the other,” not on themselves. Peplau always emphasized viewing problems in the context of the issue, not the person. Zinsser always reminded potential or novice writers to think about the audience. He would say frequently, “It’s not about you; it’s about them” (W. Zinsser, personal communication, June 1983). Both suggested always writing notes about ideas to be organized into future papers, and to keep folders of printed materials as reference points.

I listened to both, and want to end by sharing my favorite quote. It’s from John W. Gardner’s (1995) book, *Excellence*. I use it at the end of my writing workshops:

An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellent plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity, and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

REFERENCES


