A Celebration of the Life of Helen Huth Watkins, M.A.

Claire Frederick
Woltemade Hartman
Priscilla Morton
Maggie Phillips
John Watkins
James Wemple

Because there is no question whether we will remember the unforgettable Helen Watkins, we have chosen not to use a traditional “In Memoriam,” but instead, to celebrate an exceptional life that continues to grow within the innumerable people who were touched by Helen’s life, mind, and heart. It is a life whose effects on intellectual, educational, social, and personal lives within the hypnosis community and far beyond have been so vast that they will always remain uncharted.

The facts of Helen’s life are quite interesting and unique. A romantic at heart who adored opera and studied it in Innsbruck each summer, Helyanthe Maria Wagner, daughter of Anna Maria and Josef Wagner, first opened her sparkling blue eyes to this world on July 19, 1921 in Augsburg, Bavaria. As her father had died before she was born, Helen and her mother lived with her grandfather until she was eleven. Helen always spoke fondly of the grandfather who was the only father she had ever known. She knew that he loved her as unconditionally as any human could. No doubt she drew upon what she experienced in this special relationship in the years to come. When Helen was eleven, she and her mother immigrated to the United States and established residence with her maternal aunt and uncle, Mary and George Sinzker in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Helen could only speak German when she arrived, and when she began school, many of the other children ridiculed her attempts to speak English. However, her iron determination (and her excellent ear) allowed her to master the English language so well, that she eventually spoke it without any accent whatsoever. She was chosen valedictorian of her senior high school class.

Helen was briefly married to Robert Verner and widowed at age 20. She later married Richard Huth and had two children, Marvin and Karen. She received her B.A. from Pennsylvania State University (Phi Beta Kappa) and her M.A. from the University of Denver. She had completed all requirements for her doctorate degree at the University of Denver except the dissertation. She was single mother then, and she made the decision that her need to support her children and focus on their care was stronger than her need to pursue the doctorate further.

Shortly after arriving on the campus of University of Montana to take the position of psychologist at the Student Counseling Center, Helen met John (Jack) Watkins, the director of clinical training at the university. They married in 1971 and
together influenced many young people in their roles as professor and therapist. Combining their scholarly and creative energies, they developed many new techniques in psychotherapy, hoping to gift the world with more effective and efficient therapeutic strategies. Most would agree that their most outstanding achievement in this endeavor was the transformation and development of Federn’s ego state theory into Ego State Therapy.

Helen’s astonishing skills as a psychotherapist were widely recognized. She was a “therapist’s therapist,” and over the years many traveled from all over the world for intensive weekends of Ego State Therapy and training with her. After retiring from her position at University of Montana, Helen continued a part-time private practice devoted primarily to psychotherapists. Those who experienced such a weekend with Helen could easily say that she took them with great tenderness and skill to places they never imagined they would go.

Woltemade (Wally) Hartman of South Africa is a therapist who had transformative experiences with Helen that altered the course of his life. Wally is now the Director of the newly established Milton H Erickson Institute of South Africa and the organizer of the first World Congress in Ego State Therapy to be held in Bad Orb, Germany in March 2003. In 1997 he was elected for a five year term to the first democratically elected, non-racial Board for Psychology in South Africa.

Wally was born into an anti-apartheid white family in South Africa that was persecuted for its views. He was forced to do his military service at the then South African Prison Services (1988-1991). He worked (psychotherapy) with the well-known Sharpeville Five prisoners for one and a half years. They received the death sentence and were on death row for about a year. It was during this period of time that he was asked to attend their execution. He refused. Thereafter, negotiations started, and they received a reprieve from President de Klerk. Wally was told, only recently, that all his sessions with the Sharpville Five had been recorded at the time. He still has contact with the Sharpville group. He tells of his experience as Helen’s patient:

The opportunity to have been a therapist-patient of Helen H. Watkins was certainly one of the most significant experiences of my life. Since my first meeting with her as a novice therapist in Constance, Germany during 1990, I have been inspired by Helen’s therapeutic self. Her resonance, compassion and intuitive ability in helping people to recognize the multiplicity of their inner resources and to actualize their potential, abides with me still. The time I spent with her professionally and therapeutically in Missoula, Montana is one of the great highlights and proudest moments of my life.

I recall her hypnotic voice so vividly: “... and as you move farther and farther down your internal staircase, think back for a moment on your history, not just in which country you were born, but also the circumstances that contributed to your self-doubt. Consider what you believed about yourself based on what others told you to believe directly or indirectly—how you were treated. That is what defined how the different parts of you experienced you and the world; both the moments when you felt valued and wanted as well as the moments when you felt wounded and certain you would never been fulfilled.
Though you’ve had times when you didn’t want to go on, you have survived your path! You are still here, still standing, still meaning something to others—and what an amazing journey of discovery your life has been!"

Helen’s words made me realize that no matter who we are, or where we live, we all have our own journeys. Mine began when I was born “white” in apartheid South Africa—a country that had been characterized by racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Helen identified an ego state that remembered my parents vehemently opposing the apartheid regime with devastating consequences to our family: amongst others, incarceration and total despair. However, Helen’s intuitive manner soon helped me to discover that this had been a part of me that refused to succumb to and accept the racist roles assigned to me by an insensitive, hostile and hurtful environment. It had been a part of myself that did not want to be controlled and forced to believe what had been expected of me at the time. It had been a part of me, as Helen phrased it, that knew what it was like to be genuine, to have compassion for others irrespective of colour or creed, and above all to have hope, optimism and energy.

Helen Watkins helped me realize that the real power of defining self, lies within the self. Perhaps most important was the fact that I realized my own life was the most interesting one I knew, and that I could accept myself for who and what I am. That means, putting your life together in a way that you feel what you want to feel, do the things you want, and more importantly, believe what you want and live your best life every day. Helen helped me to peel back the layers of my life and to excavate the real me. Our therapeutic journey made me realize that no matter how troubled or successful, there is always potential for growth, to get better, to move forward, to live with more purpose, vibrancy and meaning. It became clear to me that I would not let my adversity imprison my mind and that I must conceptualize my past as an opportunity to dig deep for what is really true for me—then to act on that truth, growing each day in greatness and service.

One of my personal goals of service today is to help rebuild our great country and nation. I now realize that my purpose is here. I want to use my time and resources to do what I can to help abate poverty and the devastating AIDS crisis ravaging our country. What I know for sure today is that my life is a multipart series of all my experience—and each experience is created by my own thoughts, intentions, and actions; to teach me what I most need to know. The greatest discovery is learning to love myself first and then to extend that love to others in a country that needs me and my skills as a therapist—now more than ever.

Helen told me “Discover your true life journey, Wally.” I am now a man, a father and therapist in process, creating and striving for new dreams, new goals, new ideas. It never ends, and that is what is so
exciting: the journey itself! While I am making it, the voice of Helen Watkins will go with me.

John Watkins believes that Helen was such a remarkably successful therapist because she chose to enter into deep intersubjective connections with her patients:

I had written a book (Watkins, 1978) around the concept of “resonance,” which I learned from her. Resonance, a more intensive extension of empathy had not been recognized and utilized in psychodynamic approaches to therapy, being subordinated to transference as the preferred technique. Perhaps this is because in seeking to uncover the transferences the therapist is supposed to remain emotionally neutral.

In resonance, the therapist actively throws his/herself into full co-experience, cognitively, affectively, perceptually, motorically, and physiologically. With half of herself so intimately identified with her patient and the other half soundly planted in reality, Helen could both reach her patient with a true, experiential insight, and transmit such comprehension to the treated one. This understanding was achieved through “counter-resonance,” an internalization of the therapist’s self by the patient…

But this procedure requires a bit of “self-doing” on the part of the therapist—over and above the cognitive application of techniques. Helen used her “therapeutic self” constantly…

Throughout her life she presented gifts to others: the gift of respect, the gift of laughter, the gift of tears, the gift of understanding, and the gift of healing.

**Intellectual Gifts**

Helen’s international acclaim as a highly creative, innovative psychotherapist and a gifted teacher has tended to overshadow her intellectual legacy. She was well-trained in research methodology, and she demonstrated her capacity for academic research. John Watkins tells us that her Master’s thesis at the University of Pennsylvania which was based on the analysis of 1,000 case protocols. Her true intellectual interests lay, however, in the deep interpersonal study of human behavior. At one point she decided to “quit reading psychology books and listen to people” instead and entered a realm of data-gathering similar to that of Freud and other theoreticians who utilized intensive clinical observation and case studies.

Helen’s intellectual gifts to the hypnosis community were most visible in several major endeavors. One was her world-wide collaboration in the development of innovative techniques in psychotherapy including the ego-state model of therapy. Within the literature Helen’s unique intellectual contributions were insufficiently recognized because her own individual publications were few. In general, she theorized and published jointly with her husband and co-author and was unvaryingly reluctant to assume, he reports, the position of “senior author” even when she had contributed half or more to joint studies. As a sole author, and in collaboration with her husband John, Helen contributed more than 40 scientific articles, book chapters, and one complete
book. She received many honors and awards. In October, 2000, with her collaborator and co-author, John Watkins, she was awarded the Pierre Janet Award for Clinical Excellence, at the 15th International Congress of Hypnosis at the University of Munich.

Helen’s individual publications are significant in their focus. She created the Silent Abreaction and the Somatic Bridge, as well as several techniques for relieving various burdens of guilt that patients frequently carry. Helen was keenly aware of the need for ego-strengthening as the fundamental element of all therapy. Her suggestions for raising self-esteem featured the activation of an archetypal, conflict free aspect of the ego that shared some of the qualities of Inner Strength. She placed emphasis on the therapeutic alliance, resonance, and the therapeutic “being” of the therapist in deep intersubjective relationships. Priscilla Morton tells us about some of the “secret ingredients” that made Helen’s interactions with everyone she encountered an ego-strengthening event:

As a teacher, a colleague, a friend, and a therapist, Helen conveyed her belief in the resources of every individual. She had a most profound way of “being with” people that created a safe place in which they could experience their strengths and resources, face what they needed to face, learn what they needed to learn, and experience positive transformation. Helen ended one of her marathon ego state therapy weekends with a therapist by saying, “The secret is to accept who you are and utilize your past experience as an asset.” She offered her own “energy” for support, when needed, and would openly shed tears as she made the journey with so many to help them find the “true self, that fabric that will not break” (H. H. Watkins, personal communication, 1997).

Her fluency in the language of the heart was evident when she spoke in her ego-strengthening tapes of unconditional love as the “life energy from whence you came.” In a personal letter to a colleague dated 1995, she said, “Love is the answer to healing, health and happiness.” Knowing Helen as a teacher, therapist, colleague and friend has enabled me to have a deeper appreciation of “love as a skill and a force that can heal and invigorate, reconnect and guide, calm and encourage” (Gilligan, S. G., 1997, p. xiv).

During another weekend of therapy with a therapist who had traveled thousands of miles, Helen said, “Sometimes we need to leave people behind so that they can become a good memory.” I hope that we have all become as good a memory for Helen as she has become for us. We will remember Helen the person, that loving, vital, vibrant sense of the being-ness of her self. We will easily access that “felt sense” of being connected with an all-caring person who was at home with herself and the world. Helen showed us that “…it is the person of the therapist, not the technique, that is the most significant variable in determining the success or effectiveness of an approach” (Watkins & Watkins, 1997, p. 159). For most of us who knew Helen well, she has become, in the language of Ego State Therapy, an internal helper; a figure of nurturance and wisdom that we have internalized as a positive resource.
and part of our internal families.

Another of Helen’s intellectual contributions was her teaching per se. Jane Steckler (1989), a workshop participant, published a vivid account of her experience. She noted that Watkins provided many ideas and strategies that were “incisive resources” for therapists. Many of Watkins’ techniques can be found in audio and video tapes of her workshops as well as in scripts that frequently accompanied them. This outpouring of clinically-oriented planning and movement, always theoretically based, was transmitted in the oral tradition of teacher-student dialogue, and much of it has been invaluable to therapists working in the field of trauma and dissociative disorders.

It should not be forgotten that Helen Watkins was a founding member of the International Society for the Study of Dissociation and served as a supervisor and consultant to many who are now leaders in the fields of trauma and dissociation. This was one of Watkins’ quiet contributions to the rational understanding of dissociative manifestations and appropriate clinical interventions. Many of us shared referrals with Helen and had consultations with her, often via telephone. Maggie Phillips has noted how Helen facilitated our own creativity, originality, and growth:

As I thought about all that would be missing for me in this loss, I realized that over time the balance had shifted recently in our relationship from one of student and teacher, mentor and eager apprentice, to one of peers. I remember moments of trying to diminish this change on occasion, attempting to pay homage to Helen for all that she had to contribute to my work. Each time she would laugh patiently and comment, “You don’t get it, do you? You do things I wouldn’t dream of. So I learn from you too.”

Perhaps Helen’s way of fostering this kind of collaboration is the gift that lingers most of all in her rich legacy to me. I watched her create a sense of partnership during numerous clinical demonstrations in her workshops, and I had heard this quality in every conversation about her clinical work. And, somehow, she had helped to create a shared sense of two equals who enjoy contributing to each other’s learning in her relationship with me and with many other professionals who shared with her a central interest in ego-state work.

Six months after Helen’s death, I find myself deeply grateful for her unselfish investment to my professional development. I can offer no better tribute than the hope that I can create a sense of collaboration in my own relationships with clients and colleagues. Helen remains the perfect model.

With her husband and collaborator, John Watkins, Helen encouraged several generations of professionals to use the concepts of Ego State Therapy as springboards for their own expansion and growth into new areas of theory and clinical practice. Claire Frederick recalls the power of her friendship with Helen as a vital force in her own development:

The awe of Helen in which I stood as one of her workshop participants
evaporated instantly the first time I met her outside that setting. We became friends, buddies, a mutual admiration society. We gossiped; talked about clothes; hair; our intriguing clinical conundrums and successes; life, death, and divorce; what we respectively were up to; how we felt; what it was like to do yoga? How would she view a clinical situation from an ego state point of view? Or just a Helen point of view? (I taught her how to do the shoulder stand in the hall of our hotel near Amsterdam—she supplied me with a central idea for my paper on working with the dying patient).

When I (a very late-bloomer in the field of writing) presented my first paper on Ego State Therapy in Europe, my friend Helen was there to support me although she had already read it and heard it presented in the States, I thought how great it was to have a friend who would endure the boredom of listening to a scientific paper for the second time. Of course we went out for a fabulous dinner afterwards, I think at some elite shindig on a private island—having great food with Helen all over the world was another part of being her friend.

There are times when I wonder which of Helen’s energies most activated my own creative processes. Was it her teaching and vast abilities as therapist and theoretician? Her intellectual approval? Her collegiality? Or was it her broadband friendship? When we got together, we could both become extremely mischievous 10-year–old little girls who loved to play (sometimes outrageous) pranks. Did our complex and fun-filled friendship and all the incredible humor we shared perform some subterranean validation and stimulation of my mind’s playfulness, one that could be extended into areas of psychotherapy and hypnosis? What I know is that every contact with Helen was ego-strengthening, and the longer I knew her the more I grew both as a human being and a professional. I was never her patient, and she viewed me as a colleague who had exceeded her in my theoretical work (we argued strenuously and a great deal about that one, of course). Today I know only this: that every moment I spent with Helen, face to face, on the telephone, or via brief notes, was an occasion for me to be my most authentic self.

A week or so after Helen died I was seated in the lobby of a theater, watching the milling, chatting, waving, laughing crowd. Then, in my imagination Helen popped up from the rear of the area. She was wearing a lovely flowered dress. She turned, saw me, smiled, and waved as she advanced. Her message was: “I’m here. Now let’s have some fun! Let’s see what this is all about.” In a world grown increasingly cold, where to be truly genuine is not often encouraged, it was a miracle to experience Helen’s integrated, quite holy, therapeutic personhood in our friendship. Perhaps the even greater marvel is that its force, so great when she was alive, has neither vanished nor
dissipated with her death.

**Role of Humor**

As with many great teachers and healers, humor was a vehicle of deep and transmutative interpersonal interaction for Helen. James Wemple, one of Helen’s colleagues in Missoula, shares deep insight into the power of Helen’s humor.

I first met Helen Watkins in the summer of 1969. As a new graduate student at that time, I had no way of knowing the extent to which my life would be affected by this incredible human being. Her therapeutic ability would become obvious, but her wonderful, healthy sense of humor would have an equivalent effect. Helen was a multifaceted person, who always seemed confident and comfortable regardless of the situation. Part of that comfort was clearly her sense of humor. She had a delightful, ongoing sense of humor that was part of her “therapeutic self.” It was delightful to hear Helen’s shriek of laughter when she found herself in the midst of a joke. It was wonderful and relaxing to experience her enjoyment of the “twist” that occurs in good humor. Helen could laugh easily and well, both at herself and “with” others in a very benign sense. Her humor embodied the true enjoyment of living, as life takes its twists and turns. Helen had this incredible sense of the sound of life through humor. Humor for her was a way of seeing the other side of life, laughing at the absurdities and quirks of life while relishing the enjoyment that humor brings. She seemed very clear in her embracing of humor as therapeutic, long before the current emphasis on humor emerged. There were countless moments in which Helen lived the “healing power” of humor. She seemed always ready for the one-liner or the twist and was never at a loss for words when it occurred. Never desiring to malign or make someone the brunt of hostile humor, she always seemed to involve herself with humor in the most healing and healthy of ways. Her humor seemed to carry a clear message of acceptance and joy, and she continued to behaviorally teach us to laugh at our foibles while believing in ourselves as well. The result was delightful interaction that was constantly on going and changing, depending on the situation. As much as Helen was the therapeutic self and the master of ego state therapy, she was also inevitably the person who lived humor as a vital, ongoing, healthy part of her life. She is given less credit for this, I believe, given the incredible therapeutic skill that she possessed. Her reputation as a therapist frequently seemed to overshadow other aspects of her life, including her sense of humor. I saw her utilize humor with many, many people over the years, in a natural and effortless manner in which she simply seemed to be able to laugh in an easy and relaxed fashion. I can not express adequately the ability that Helen had. It seemed to flow from an inner-healthy child. The humor was as much a part of her therapy as direct techniques were, and I feel that Helen lived and
embodied the nature of humor as a means of both dealing with and appreciating life in a healthy, positive way. To me, her humor will be missed as much as her therapeutic touch. She brought humor to therapy in a natural and effortless fashion. In fact, laughter seemed to emerge for her as a message of joy and brought her interaction with others to another level. It brought with it a sense of belonging, connection, and acceptance that facilitated healing and appreciation of the gentle side of life to all whom knew her. I believe she would want us to continue to live well, and to love. I believe she would also want us to laugh well and often.

As I conclude these thoughts, I believe she would have said to me, “I know I’m wonderful Wemple (giggle). Wrap it up would you, it’s time to go play.”

References