



Margaret Brenman-Gibson



As the first psychologist, indeed the first nonphysician from any discipline, to receive full clinical as well as research psychoanalytic training in America, Margaret Brenman-Gibson, PhD broke ground for and inspired so many who came after her. Having accomplished this as a woman only confirmed the conviction she conveyed that doors would, indeed must, open to a person of talent, passion, persistence, and intellectual daring. She was fiercely committed to (so as not to repeat the word “passion”.) her beliefs which included psychoanalysis and the peace movement. She was among the last survivors of a generation of gifted young psychoanalysts who forged the hegemonic primacy of the American ego psychology paradigm. At Harvard, in the Department of Psychiatry at Cambridge Hospital, she was one of the first women to be appointed as a full professor – Clinical Professor of Psychology in 1982.

Margaret Brenman-Gibson received her doctorate in psychology from the University of Kansas. During her years in Topeka as a psychology intern, clinical fellow and trainee in psychoanalysis, she worked with Merton Gill at the Menninger Clinic where they studied altered states of consciousness.

She did pioneering research in the understanding of hypnosis and hypnotherapy, eventuating in a joint monograph, “Hypnotherapy,” published in 1944 as a wartime service to psychiatrists and psychologists in the armed forces.

Dr. Brenman-Gibson went to the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1947, as one of the Menninger group, which included David Rapaport, Merton Gill, Roy Schafer, later joined by Erik Erikson. They joined Robert Knight in founding Riggs as a psychoanalytic treatment center and contributed enormously to the theory and clinical practice of ego psychology in America. They catalyzed each other’s creativity and selfconsciously turned the grand experiment of treating very troubled patients in an open therapeutic community into a Golden Age of conceptual and clinical inventiveness. Dr. Brenman-Gibson

was always a critical thinker, never taking for granted the everpresent shibboleths that crowd every field of intellectual endeavor, psychoanalysis included.

Margaret Brenman-Gibson had a knack for off-beat entrances and positive provocation. At Austen Riggs she would often arrive just after the annual Rapaport-Klein meetings had begun, provoking this happily indignant group with a giggle that suggested they shouldn't have started without her, and then pacifying them through a seamless joining of the discussion. She had an easy eloquence about her, and she could think out loud in ways that were uniquely hers, yet trenchantly connected to the work of other members. Margaret felt keenly the awakening of the 60's and brought its issues to case discussion – gender awareness, the ethical issues surrounding personal and societal conflict, the selfregulatory value of meditative states. She sparred with Otto Will about how a particular bit of a patient's behavior might be more adaptive than pathological, but found common ground with him in recognizing the therapeutic power of relational authenticity.

In another series of summer meetings held in Wellfleet, Massachusetts with, among others, Kai Erikson and John Mack in attendance, Dr. Brenman-Gibson sat herself near the epicenter of the conversation and participated not only by speaking words when granted the floor, but by an almost continual flow of vocal murmurs and changing facial expressions and shifts in bodily attitude. This was another instance of her "being there" and participating with the whole of her person. Margaret's ability to use dramatic emphasis is also illustrated by an encounter in China in the 1980's, where as part of a professional group that was going to be denied access to students and faculty at the university in Shanghai, she successfully threatened to prevent the play "Two for the SeeSaw" by her husband William Gibson from being performed there.

Her many years of active collaboration with Erik Erikson made her the foremost teacher of his work, which she extended in her own original studies of creativity in both the arts and the sciences. Her interests in the creative process led to seminal work in psychohistory, an interdisciplinary field melding psychoanalytic perspectives with those of biography and history. The product, Clifford Odets: American Playwright, relates the life of the man to the social political history through which he lived and to the dynamic of his creative products as efforts at mastering specific life dilemmas. In this work, she was able to reflect the unique character and special talents of a prodigiously creative individual, crafting from the language of psychoanalysis new ways to describe personality.. Among her published works is the classic paper, "On teasing and being teased: The problem of moral masochism."

As a clinician and teacher, Dr. Brenman-Gibson had a knack for entrances. She most often arrived wearing an interesting pastiche of layered outfits. She saw patients in her home and is reported to have "shuffled", sometimes a bit late, into her chair, but then, without an awareness on the part of the patient of its actually happening, she was fully "there." She created the same sense of presence as a teacher that she demonstrated elsewhere. She did not stand on ceremony with either colleagues or students. She did not hesitate to interrupt or correct, and often made sure that all the "professionals", including herself, were cut down to size. For both faculty and students, she gave much of herself to help them achieve a better understanding of patients and clinical situations. She is described as a person of capacity – for pain, for uncertainty, for the struggles of living, and for the humanness of it all, and thus served as a unique model. With the severely mentally ill, her intense and respectful engagement of the patient served as a model for all who watched. She was a moving force in bringing the teaching of Erik Erikson into the curriculum at Cambridge and broadening the psychoanalytic perspective of the training offered. She was videotaped for the Women's History Project at Harvard Medical School.

Margaret Brenman-Gibson had a deep concern about nuclear weapons and the use of nuclear power. She was by no means passive in her response to these concerns, having picketed in, among other places, Los Alamos. As in the clinical encounter, it was essential that she “be there.” Doing things in person was central to her political and personal validity. Her connection to Los Alamos and Livermore had a very personal dimension. She had met a protégé of Edward Teller on an airplane, who invited her to speak with “his family” — the group of nuclear physicists who had become bombmakers. Professor Brenman-Gibson collected an enormous amount of interview data that tells a horrifying story of creativity in the service of mass destruction and of fathers bestowing this legacy of achievement and despair upon their sons. She may not have been able to bring this pain — the pain of her last “patients,” whose work she had so vigorously protested for years — to light. To our knowledge, the data remains in her office as an unpublished psychohistorical study.

In her last years, Margaret Brenman-Gibson again focused her attention on the Austen Riggs Center and participated in the founding of the Erikson Institute for Education and Research. Her participation in the deliberations leading to the formation of the Institute illuminated the meaning of Erik Erikson’s work as it applied to the clinical context of Austen Riggs. She took part in the Institute as an Erikson Scholar in the late 90’s. The last seminar she taught at Riggs focused on identity, not through readings and lectures, but through the members’ reflection on and discovery of the identity elements that had brought them to “that seminar moment,” as Dr. Brenman-Gibson might have called it. These young professionals were startled at the intimacy she facilitated among the group and moved by such a deep learning experience.

Margaret Brenman-Gibson was a revered therapist, teacher, writer, researcher, and social activist. She had a liveliness of mind, playfulness, energy and a quality of “greatness.” She thought about the world, and the place of our work in it, on a larger scale, and she dared to try to live up to that vision.

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