

## In Memory of Viola W. Bernard, M.D.

February 22, 1907 - March 21, 1998

Editors Note: A memorial celebration was held for Viola on May 19, 1998, at The New York Academy of Medicine. The following was written by Ms. Kelly for the occasion.

### Teacher, Healer, Activist

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by Kathleen L. Kelly

Dr. Viola W. Bernard's extraordinary life spanned almost our entire century. She combined a profound dedication to each individual patient with a wider vision of public health psychiatry that led her to stretch the boundaries of her profession.

A truly independent spirit, she had little patience with doctrinaire thinking and understood that real life was often too complex to be explained neatly by any single theoretical model or political party line. Throughout her long career, she blended theories and therapies with wisdom and a deep humanity to design what she called "composite remedies" for complex social and psychological problems.

Viola W. Bernard was first and foremost a physician, but she was also a gifted teacher and a tireless advocate for better health care, human rights, social justice and world peace. She collaborated with social workers, judges and educators to increase awareness of psychological factors in problems they saw every day in their communities.

Although she was born to privilege, Dr. Bernard devoted much of her life to the poor and disadvantaged. A passionate opponent of bigotry-in society at large and within her own profession-she was a major force in the effort to open up postgraduate psychiatric and psy-

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choanalytic education to African American doctors in the 1950s and 1960s. She lent her considerable energy and wisdom to efforts to alleviate the damaging psychological effects of poverty and injustice, and was an early pioneer in applying psychological knowledge to the menace of modern warfare. The World Health Organization will re-issue her 1970 paper on the psychological aspects of chemical and biological weapons this year.

The author of more than one hundred scientific publications covering research, administration, and clinical issues in psychiatry, child psychiatry and psychoanalysis, she was a major force in the growth of community and social psychiatry in the U.S. Dr. Bernard's last paper, "Some Applications of Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis to Social Problems," was published in the February 1998 issue of *The Psychoanalytic Review*.

With generosity, humor and profound dedication to principle, Dr. Bernard set the standard for generations of scholars and clinicians who follow her.

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In Memory of Viola

by Perry Ottenberg, M.D.

Viola W. Bernard, M.D. was a powerhouse in her personality, indefatigable in her work habits, and uncompromising in her expectations of excellence. We worked together for forty or forty-five years. And everything that she touched was improved, from my point of view. When you worked with Vi you did your homework and checked every reference, footnote, quote. That was scholarship, and that work will last for a long time. We published three or four papers together, and her input always made me work to a higher standard. I believe our efforts together are my finest publications.

The first one was a GAP report on school desegregation, and Vi's awareness of what was going on in our culture in terms of racism and prejudice, and how to deal with it, was so beautiful. She never gave up the struggle for African-American equality in our society. It was a lifetime commitment.

Vi taught me that "social change is not an event; it's a process". When she got involved with an issue or a person, it was no brief encounter. If you were going to promise something or do something, you did it. And that was the way she worked with her patients, and with social issues. In the early 60s, we worked together on a monograph for GAP on psychiatric aspects of the prevention of nuclear war that has become a classic, and with Fritz Redl we wrote a chapter on dehumanization as a psychological defense in reaction to modern war. This article has been reprinted in four books. From her point of view, anything in print was permanent, it was in a library, you couldn't take it back, you had to live with it. And so it better be as close to perfect as possible.

And I remember Nyack, meeting distinguished analysts from all over the country there, playing tennis. Usually, they got beaten. Nyack had a very special quality—each tree, vine, border of flowers felt her touch. There was the most beautiful natural swimming pool I've ever been in, surrounded by trees and rocks. And it was so cold; after enjoying her wonderful scotch, it really sobered me up. I loved going there, no matter what the brow-beating was.

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Vi had this red convertible that she would drive down the highway, and it was dangerous! These big semi-tractor trailer trucks would go by and the drivers looked down at her and they did what I never could do. They said, "Hello, babe!" and there would be this interchange.

In 1960 Vi, Judd Marmor and I published a paper on the psychodynamics of opposition to public health programs. One weekend, I was at Nyack working on this paper, and she took me up to the attic. We removed a large crate, about 3 cubic feet. On this quiet Saturday night, alone before a fire in her deep well-worn chairs, we opened it together. Inside was a fragment of the 1934 Rockefeller Center mural by Diego Rivera, which was intentionally destroyed by Nelson Rockefeller, who'd commissioned it, because of its anti-war theme and heroic portrait of Vladimir Lenin. Years later, as silently as it arrived, this fragment joined other rescued pieces of the mural in Mexico City, where it was reconstructed.

Vi spoke on unexpected occasions over many decades about her private life. Gradually through the years, personal confidence built up to the point where she could reveal her own private joys and disappointments. I never knew when this would occur, but it was tender for me to realize how this powerful friend could share her feelings and fragility.

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My mind is so full of Vi, and these private stories. I would like to wrap it up for the next generation and the next. She was a lady, she had grace, she was tough-minded. She wouldn't tolerate ifs, ands or buts. There was nothing sloppy about her work. In every organization Vi was part of, whether it was the American Orthopsychiatric Association, the American Psychoanalytic Association, the Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, GAP, the American College of Psychiatry and the College of Psychoanalysts—wherever she was, she raised the standards. She maintained a level of acuity and awareness that was truly marvelous.

And from her spirit and her generosity, I learned more about pure altruism from Vi than from anybody else I've ever known. T.S. Eliot said, "Wisdom is the recognition of good and evil in all behavior." Viola Bernard understood this precept. I shall always miss her.