Health & Medicine

Grouped Therapy

Albert Ellis’s unruly papers.

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|
Winter 2010-11

Albert Ellis often said that he would have been an efficiency expert if he hadn’t become a psychologist and best-selling author. But an actual efficiency expert would scoff at the state of his papers, which were recently donated to Columbia’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

“It’s a complete mess,” says Michael Ryan, director of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library. “It’s one of the more disorganized collections I’ve come across.” It’s also an “A-level” resource for researchers, he added.

Ellis, who died in 2007, developed rational emotive behavior therapy (a precursor to cognitive behavioral therapy) to help people overcome neuroses without undergoing years of analysis, which he considered a very inefficient approach. He received an MA and PhD in clinical psychology from Columbia in the 1940s, but items in the collection go back to his undergraduate days at the City College of New York. The collection, a gift from the Albert Ellis Institute and Ellis’s widow, Debbie Joffe-Ellis, contains over 70 years of correspondence (including letters from Ayn Rand, with whom Ellis had an affair), Dictaphone recordings, and hundreds of small index cards on which Ellis liked to make notes. The papers will be available to the public in early 2012.

This past November, six movers and two archivists helped pack and transport the collection from the Albert Ellis Institute, a townhouse on East 65th Street, to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library. They made short work of it, packing up about 300 linear feet of papers and 600 boxes in less than two hours. It wasn’t complete chaos: Ellis’s notebooks (some inscribed with the Bronx address where Ellis spent his

childhood) lined the shelves from floor to ceiling, in chronological order. Other materials, including sheet music for Ellis's therapeutic song parodies, a 1968 postcard sent from the U.S.S.R., vinyl records, photographs, and floppy disks, were packed into moving boxes for a hired archivist to sort through, starting in January. A Mr. Potato Head, nail clippers, and confidential patient files, also found in the office, were not part of the gift.

Before the first letter is cataloged, the archivist will have to conduct extensive research on Ellis, and learn enough about him and the people around him to know what to look for in the collection.

"With someone like Ellis, it's important to find out what he did and how he operated," Ryan says of the man whom the American Psychological Association once ranked as the second most influential psychotherapist of the 20th century, behind Carl Rogers. (Freud came in third.) "You would want to read his books, because manuscript pages will show up, and you will want to match like with like. You'd also want to learn who his patients were — there are a lot of correspondence files — and to talk to people at the institute. You'd want to get as full a portrait of the man as you could."

Once the preliminary research is done, the initial survey of the collection begins. In such a large trove, there could literally be millions of pieces of paper. "You have to go through box by box," says Ryan. "There's not a quick way around it."

Generally, the author's organizing method is preserved so researchers can gain insight from the arrangement of his papers. But Ellis's papers are in such a jumble that the archivist must impose his own order.

While weeding through a lifetime of notes and letters, the archivist will build a preliminary architecture, taking notes on the scope and content of each box. This information will then be grouped into series and subseries. Correspondence, for example, might be one series, subdivided by incoming and outgoing letters. The archivist will also appraise the items, deciding what should be kept, thrown away, or returned to the institute.

"You want to subdivide a series when necessary, but you have to be careful," says Susan Hamson, the curator of manuscripts and university archivist at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library. "If a collection is hyperorganized, down to the item level, you can't find anything."

According to Hamson, topical organization is often best, but one has to be attuned to the subject. “The collection speaks to you, and the organization often comes to you. It’s as much an art as a skill.”

Anyone who wants to look up notes about Ellis’s best-selling books Sex Without Guilt or Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy, or read those letters from Ayn Rand, will be welcome to search the finding aid — the online guide created by the archivist to help researchers locate the materials they are interested in — and fill out a call slip. When the papers are delivered, researchers will be able to examine the documents in the reading room.

Hamson doesn’t envy the archivist charged with organizing the Ellis collection. But Michael Ryan isn’t too worried. “They’ve all seen worse,” he says.

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