

Editorial

by Mary Ann Jimenez, Ph.D

The year 2000 may not be the actual beginning of the next millennium or even the end of the 20th century (we know we have to wait for 2001 for these milestones), but the meaning attached to this arbitrary date change by at least some of the world's population (judging by news coverage) suggests that a chapter has been closed in many people's minds and lives. Remarkable moments in the passage of time often have to do with a sense of narratives completed or begun. According to historians, the end of the 19th century was accompanied by seismic revolutions in cultural styles and revisions of formerly accepted truths. The import given to a socially constructed, as well as mathematically inaccurate, concept of the "new millennium" is largely due to the perception that the year 2000 signifies a milestone in human history. The concept of millennium compels us as individuals to write a coda to our own history—those who marvel at reaching this marker in history as well as those who impatiently wait for the new wonders implicitly promised by the 21st century. Observers of ancient civilizations, Egyptian, Chinese, and Judaic, to mention a few, are likely to recognize the relatively narrow Christian origins of the millennium—marking only a small slice of human history in a Eurocentric and Whiggish manner that valorizes scientific and technological ad-

vances made primarily in the West. Nonetheless, regardless of the constructed, even culturally chauvinistic, origins of the idea of the millennium, it does speak to the human need to give our stories beginnings and ends. All narratives, like the concept of the millennium, are created by humans as arbitrary markers of beginnings and ending points in the undifferentiated flow of time. In this spirit, it may be worthwhile to contemplate some of the narratives braided through the 20th century that offer us perspectives on our current place in human history.

Without question, one of the greatest achievements of this century was the end of apartheid in South Africa, achieved, as were the civil rights victories in this country in the 20th century, by newly empowered oppressed groups. The optimism of this thought is counterbalanced by the examples of human horror and treachery during this century—such as the Holocaust and the countless butcheries in Cambodia under the Pol Pot regime. Wars fought and resolutions undone in little more than the blink of an eye—World War I and Vietnam come to mind—are matched by transcendent struggles for equality and human dignity led by Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The United States succeeded in establishing military as well as economic and cultural hegemony over the rest

of the world after the Soviet Union opted out of the cold war in order to redefine itself along historic and cultural boundaries.

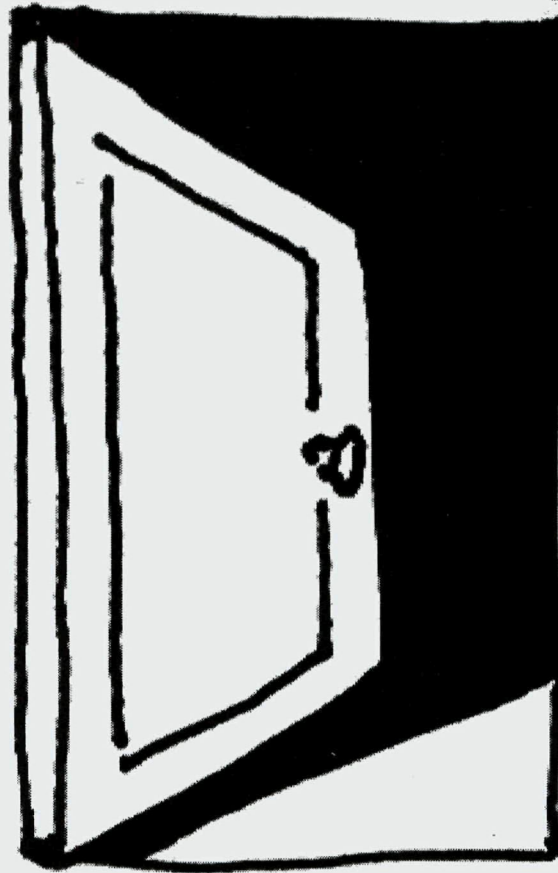
The ascendance of the United States as a great world power is one of the strongest narrative lines of the past 100 years. Yet with more than 6 billion people in the world as of 1998, the United States was still behind China and India in the most populous places race. Consuming far more than its share of resources, attention, and cultural ascendance, the United States has sought to set the standard for progress, success and happiness for the rest of humanity. Insofar as it has succeeded, it has engendered a sense of unearned privilege and entitlement in many of its citizens, assumptions that did not exist one hundred years ago, when this country was shadowed by the great European powers. This change in our national consciousness took place in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that most human struggles and triumphs took place in other countries during this century. Yet the power of the United States to be a world leader in social justice has been largely untapped until now. To turn our cultural and economic advantages to this new mission would signal a deep change, worthy of a new millennium.

What can we as professionals, seeking to transform personal and social realities, learn from the excitement of the millennium and

from our place in human history in the year 2000? The most important insight may be the power of new beginnings—the ability of people to recreate themselves and their social realities. To forge new life stories after experiencing horrors, as did those who survived the tragedies of the Holocaust and other catastrophes born of human evil or natural disasters, is a sign of the raw courage embedded in human nature. Narrative therapy is based on the power of the stories we tell ourselves about our lives to redeem us from our suffering. The ability to begin anew, demonstrated by the shared conceit that the year 2000 is the beginning of a new era, rather than an ending of the old, is a universal and triumphant human capacity. As professional helpers, we can transmit this optimism and courage to our colleagues, our clients, and our students. All efforts to co-create personal and social change depend on the power of transforming narratives, which allow for new beginnings. May the freshness of this calendar year infuse *Reflections'* readers with the energy to begin again the process of becoming.

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