

# THE FRENCH CEREMONY: BRINGING DIGNITY TO A WORLD WAR II VETERAN IN A NURSING HOME SETTING

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*In this narrative, the author uses an advanced generalist approach to illustrate the integration of the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice in a nursing home setting. While still meeting the individual needs of the client, social work practice can extend beyond the individual case and provide a means for a mezzo and macro contribution to a social group as a whole. A small nursing home setting in New England is utilized to exemplify this process.*

Historically, social work was rooted in a Freudian analytical perspective. Further reflection and study led theorists and practitioners to other approaches, which included the psychodynamic, social learning, person-in-environment, systems theory, and ecological perspectives. As we, as clinicians, consider clients using these perspectives, we view an increasingly widening circle around individuals. This greater perspective allows us to see an array of factors which affect the development and growth of the individual. The dynamic influences on clients' lives of the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, as utilized in an advanced generalist social work program, leads the clinician to a more insightful understanding of the psychosocial development of an individual (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 1996; Turner, 1996; Roy & Vecchiolla, 2004).

An advanced generalist social work practice program conveys to the student an understanding of the significance of the environment that surrounds the individual. It guides one's thinking to the realization that we cannot separate the individual from the mezzo and macro level influences that affect his or her life. This reality has not gone unnoticed in the history of humankind. In literary terms, the expression, "No man is an island" distinctly explains this fact (Donne, 1624). Individuals cannot totally separate themselves from environmental influences, just as oceans and rivers cannot isolate themselves from the landmasses. Individuals are affected by their interrelationships with others, environmental factors, norms, community laws, governmental

and economic policies, as well as global issues. Each of us, no matter what our socio-economic level, race, religion, or sexual orientation, is affected by these influences (Gitterman, 2001; Karger & Stoesz, 2002; Trattner, 1999).

African cultures believe that it takes a village to raise a child. This cultural perspective historically holds in high regard environmental influences on the individual. This worldview is true for all cultures, in all times. To deny this is to deny that a world exists outside the scope of the individual.

I will now proceed to discuss my experience in treating a nursing home patient using an advanced generalist approach. In utilizing a micro, mezzo, and macro level approach, I found that the therapeutic process was more enhanced and it provided for a more successful treatment outcome. For the purposes of this article, I define the micro level as the client and his immediate family; the mezzo level is the nursing home and the residents/staff; and lastly, the macro level includes those institutions that represent the United States of America, including the U.S. military and the French government. With this context established, I will now present the narrative of Paul, an 83-year-old resident of a nursing home.

## Narrative

In room nineteen sat an 83-year-old gentleman who waited patiently for each day to pass. He was blind. He lost the sights of the world that he was born to eleven years earlier from macular degeneration. There was

nothing the doctors could do for him to take him out of his world of darkness. Paul sat in his large, green, plastic, upholstered chair and listened to his tapes. The music of the 1930's and 1940's rang loudly from his room. Many others complained that the music was too loud, but Paul had lost a great deal of his hearing, so he had to play his music loudly in order to hear these great sounds of the past. While Paul was still a large man, he had become frail from age. He had difficulty breathing at times and was afraid he would choke to death. Paul spent his entire day in his chair. While he went to the dining room for his breakfast, lunch, and dinner, he spent the remaining hours of the day in that large, green, plastic chair. What had happened to this man who was once so strong and vibrant? A provider for his entire life for others, he now sat, at times incontinent, in a chair as others took care of him.

I first met Paul in 2000. I assumed his case because of his self-isolating behavior. He did not interact with the other patients or participate in social functions. However, when I began meeting with him, Paul was anxious to talk about the experiences of his life. He spoke of the time when his high school baseball team went down south to play in a baseball playoff. One of the members of the team was a young Black man. As the team entered the hotel in a segregated town in the south, a sign hung over the hotel that read "No Negroes and dogs." Paul and his team never entered that hotel. They would not abandon their teammate.

The racism continued at the baseball field. The crowd swore and threw stones at the team because the team insisted that their Black teammate would play ball. Due to the crowd's treatment of them, the team immediately decided that they would not play. With baseball bats in their hands for protection, these young men left this small southern town and headed home to New England. Paul explained, "He was our team member and he belonged on the team." On the way home these young men stopped to see a Yankees game in New York City. Paul and his teammates were wearing their red, white, and blue hats. When they entered the stadium, the entire Yankees team and the crowd applauded this team of

youngsters from western Massachusetts for what they had done. I asked Paul how they knew and he replied, "The news had made its way to New York City." To Paul, this was no big accomplishment; his team did what they did because it was the right thing to do.

Paul spoke of the time in his early youth when he was recruited for a tryout with a national baseball team. Paul went to the tryout and to his surprise made the team. He called his father with great excitement. His father, however, did not share this enthusiasm when he heard the news. He told Paul that his first responsibility was to help support the family. So Paul came home from the farm team and ended his love affair with baseball forever. Paul said, "How different my life would have been had I played baseball." As Paul looked back, he observed, "This is the way it had to be." Paul, again, did what he had to do because he felt it was the right thing to do.

### **Paul's Experience During World War II**

As World War II raged, Paul decided to join the Army. He was assigned to an infantry division in France as the end of the war neared. Paul's unit had lost 17 young men in its first day of combat. Paul was asked to carry the bazooka since the last soldier using this weapon had lost his life. As Paul aimed his bazooka at a German tank, a German soldier using a telescopic lens from afar shot him. The bullet went into his left side, under his spine and came out the other side. The soldier who was feeding the bullets into the bazooka pulled Paul into a foxhole. Paul remained in that foxhole for 24 hours in the heavy rains. It was the steady flow of raindrops touching his face that Paul attributes to keeping him alive as he bled throughout that night.

When help finally came, Paul was placed on a stretcher and transported on the hood of a jeep to Paris. It was a painful ride for Paul through the rocky fields of France. When he reached Paris, he underwent surgery for his wounds. Paul was then sent to a hospital in England and finally returned to the United States aboard the Queen Mary. Paul said he traveled in style. On the ship was the actor Andrew Doreen of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. He talked to Paul for a long time. Later on

during the trip, the actor turned to Paul and said, "Soldier boy, turn your head and look way out there." Paul turned his head and in the distance he saw the Statue of Liberty. When the ship docked, Paul walked down the plank, knelt, and kissed the earth and said, "Am I glad to be home." I thanked Paul for his part in helping to make this country safe for my generation. He looked at me with a smile and said, "It was the right thing to do."

As Paul told me his story, I could not help noticing that here was a man who served his country with great pride and dignity. Paul is a humble man who suffered wounds on the battlefield, but holds no bitterness or regret. He is a man who served his nation with great honor. I turned to Paul and asked him if he had received the commemorative certificate that the French Government had recently bestowed on every American soldier who participated in the Liberation of France. He replied that he had not because he was afraid to attend the ceremony due to the limitation caused by his blindness. With Paul's permission, I contacted the French consulate in Boston to see if someone there could obtain the recognition that he so rightfully deserved. It was my desire to bring a sense of honor and dignity to this elderly man who spends so many hours of each day sitting in his green chair.

#### **Working With the French Consulate**

My initial contact with the French Consulate was quite pleasant. They offered to send me an application and stated that they would process it as soon as I returned it with Paul's discharge papers. After receiving the form, I contacted Paul's son and asked whether he had his father's discharge papers. To my surprise, the discharge papers were tucked away in a box, which also held Paul's Purple Heart and a Bible that he had carried on that ill-fated day. Paul mentioned that the Bible was still stained with blood from his wounds. Paul's son, excited, brought me the discharge papers the next day.

I immediately sent the discharge papers to the Consul General's Office, but a month passed without word. I became concerned because Paul came down with pneumonia. I called the Consul's office and they informed

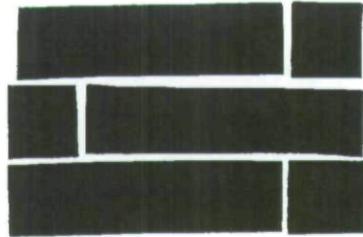
me that Paul's application had been approved and a certificate of honor was being mailed. I pondered this circumstance and asked myself, "Does this man deserve more than receiving a certificate in the mail? Does this action enhance the dignity of this man?" So, I asked the Liaison to the American Veterans if I could have an American serviceman in the area present Paul the certificate. His reply was that this was impossible, and that only a representative of the French government could make the presentation. I checked with the liaison, who said that he would discuss it with the Consul General. After an hour or so, I received a return call. The liaison laughingly told me that since Paul was a hero and shared the same Polish heritage as the Consul General, he would come to the nursing home to present the certificate. He arranged to call after the first of the year to set things up.

#### **January 1<sup>st</sup> and Beyond**

The days and weeks passed, and I heard nothing from the French Consulate. I finally called and requested to speak to the Liaison for the American Veterans. He was not in, so I left messages on his voice mail over a two-week period. Eventually, I spoke to an officer of the consulate who told me that the liaison was on the West Coast and that he should not have committed the Consul General to this project. She said that Paul was in a nursing home setting, which did not provide the necessary environment that the Consul General required. She added that the Consul General had specific requirements for ceremonial events, including large crowds, dignitaries, music, a trumpeter, and full media coverage. I replied that we were talking about a man who had lain in a foxhole bleeding in France. The officer relented and agreed to contact the liaison on the West Coast.

The following day I received a call back from the liaison. He was very apologetic and explained that this was a very significant ceremony. I explained that this ceremony meant a great deal to Paul as well as all the other nursing home residents who had lived through this special period of time in our history, that World War II affected not only France, but also our own national security. The

residents of this nursing home had lived this experience. Hearing my plea, the liaison said he would talk to the Consul General. He called me back and said that due to my personal appeal he would send the Vice Consul to the nursing facility to present the award to Paul. We arranged an immediate date because of Paul's declining health: the nursing staff was concerned about his recent bout with pneumonia as well as his age and failing heart.



#### **Preparing for the Ceremony**

We had one week to prepare for the ceremony. As preparations began, I began recalling a group therapy session I held in the nursing home a month earlier during the Fourth of July holiday. The women in this group focused their discussion on the many things they had done for the war effort during World War II. Martha explained that she worked in a factory that made garments. When the war started, the factory converted to producing the netting that was used in military tents to protect service men from insects and disease. Patty worked in a high security position in which she printed the blueprints of the bombing sites used during the war. Susan and Thelma worked in a gun factory inspecting the guns used by our troops. Stephanie worked in a factory that was converted to make rope, which was used by our forces.

These five women represented the many women of this country who served the war effort by working in jobs and factories across our country to produce the supplies our troops needed during World War II. I felt they should occupy a place of honor, too. I decided at that moment to include these women in the ceremony. My supervisor suggested that I honor the men in the facility that had also served their country through the years. Three gentlemen were added to our list. We

contacted a state representative who said she would provide each of these selected residents with a certificate of honor on behalf of our state.

The excitement around the pending ceremony began to grow. We received a call from the Veterans of Foreign Wars Honor Guard, instructing us that they would be arriving one hour before the ceremony in full-dress uniform. They would need an office to use, and they would present as a formal unit with flags and rifles. We inquired how they had heard about the ceremony and they replied that they had been notified by the French Consulate's Office.

The next focus point was the nursing home itself. The administrator had housekeeping strip and polish all the floors in the facility. While that was happening, the activities department was busy cleaning the fish tank and birdcages. The entire staff was on alert to make the facility sparkle. We held a special staff meeting to explain to the employees what was occurring. The staff was instructed that on the day of the ceremony they would park their cars at an adjacent factory so that there would be enough parking spaces for the guests.

I was busy trying to line up dignitaries, musicians, and the media. I called the mayor, state representatives, and a United States Congressman. The Congressman's office requested I fax him an outline of the program as well as my speech. To my surprise, the office called back and informed me that he could attend. The mayor also committed to attend the ceremony. The two local newspapers immediately agreed to cover the event. They requested, however, a short statement on the ceremonial events planned. The television stations were not as enthusiastic, but said that they would come to the event if there were not a bigger news story that day. Unfortunately, when the day arrived, the television stations did not come. They determined that the twilight honor of a frail man was not a newsworthy event that day.

My next task was to call the relatives of all the residents honored, informing them of the date and time of the ceremony. If there was anything special they wanted their loved ones to wear that day, we asked that they

bring the clothing into the nursing home. The relatives contacted joined in the excitement. Through these conversations a greater insight into the lives of these residents' lives was achieved. My conversations were not only with the daughters and sons of the residents, but also with sisters-in law, nieces, and nephews. Many of these residents had lost their spouses; others had neither married nor had children. I found that the nieces and nephews played the role of the children for these residents. I learned that the residents had shared their wartime stories with their loved ones throughout their lives. These wartime memories had not been touched by Alzheimer's or dementia, but for some reason, had remained safe in their minds. A neurologist might assess this as "old memory," but one may wonder if a different reason exists that cannot be scientifically explained.

The French Consulate's office wanted music and we supplied that. They requested the French National Anthem and the American National Anthem be played. They also wanted taps played for all the fallen soldiers who had died during World War II. Due to limited funding, I could not hire a professional musician, so I called a local college music department to see if anyone was available. Two young men who might be available to play contacted me and we discussed the program as well as the price. One of the young said he did not know the French National Anthem but would learn it over the weekend. For the first time during this project a feeling of fright came over me. Having played an instrument myself, I feared that one weekend would not be enough time to prepare the piece, so I contacted the music department's coordinator who stated she would oversee the student's preparation. The student never called that weekend, and when I finally got in touch with him, he told me that a trumpeter would play the French National Anthem on the keyboard! It was at that moment I began to imagine the French Ceremony taking place at the end of the week in a room filled with the sounds of an assortment of misplayed notes.

### **Macro Level Involvement**

The following day I received a call from the college music department where I had hired the two musicians. The school informed me that their school's media department would be attending the ceremony. It seems they wanted to take pictures of these young men as they played and would use these photographs in a spring brochure for the school. The ceremony had begun to grow into a far larger event than I had anticipated.

The day of the ceremony finally arrived. When I entered the nursing home carrying the flowers, the social work supervisor announced, "I want to see you now!" I knew by her words and body language there was trouble. The door was closed and I waited for the breaking news. I was told that the Liaison of Veterans Affairs had called after looking over my program and would not allow the women and male residents to be honored during the ceremony. He told my supervisor that a formal French ceremony could not include any individuals other than the honoree. I immediately thought of the disappointment that would await the nursing home residents and their loved ones. They had so looked forward to this day.

The supervisor instructed me to call the liaison to resolve the matter. He told me that we would not honor these women in the French ceremony. I asked him how he could leave out five frail, elderly women who worked in factories so that the men who fought on French soil would have their supplies? I explained to him that this is a nation of immigrants and it was because of the efforts of these men and women during World War II that many more immigrants could come to our country in their quest for freedom and self-determination. I even added that my father and grandparents were immigrants from Russia and Poland respectively. He said he would discuss it with the French Consul and call me right back. Within minutes I received a call back. He informed me that the French Consul General shared the same nationality as I, and it was because of this that he would allow the five women to get their roses. Paul, however, would have to hand the ladies the flowers in appreciation for what they had done

during the war. This would happen after the formal conclusion of the French ceremony.

Whatever the reason, I was happy that the women would be included in the program. To my disappointment, though, the Consul did not let the other gentlemen be honored. He based his decision on the fact that these men did not serve on French soil. While I silently questioned how the French Government could exclude their participation, the three elderly men sat with pride in the audience with red boutonnieres pinned to their shirts. Eventually, the nursing home would make up this slight by honoring these gentlemen at another function at which they received state certificates of appreciation.

### The Ceremony

The ceremony began, and the dignitaries entered the room one by one. Those we expected to attend were there, except for the mayor, who arrived at the end of the ceremony. The honor guard entered the room carrying rifles and flags. Paul's son wheeled Paul into the room. What a beautiful sight! One of my professors of social work always said, "It is all about the client." As I watched the tears run down Paul's face, all I could think was: "It's all about the client." It was not about the dignitaries, the media, musicians, or the governmental organizations. It was about Paul, the five women honorees, three elderly soldiers with red boutonnieres, and all the other residents, family, and friends who sat in that room. It was a celebration of their lives.

After Paul and the dignitaries were seated, the speeches began. The administrator of the nursing home, the Liaison for the American Veterans, the United States representative, the French Vice Consul, and I all spoke. Cameras were flashing and reporters were scribbling on their pads. To me the most beautiful moments of this ceremony were the sights and sounds of this elderly population. The young musician played the French National Anthem on his keyboard as the audience stood silently in respect. Those who could not stand sat in their wheelchairs solemnly at attention. The American national anthem was then played. At first, we could hear the whispers of voices singing, "Oh say can you see" and then as the

crescendo in a symphony grows, so did the voices grow louder and larger until all the voices of the residents, staff, and guests filled the entire room. As I watched, tears began to fill my eyes. Within the structure of this 68-bed nursing home, one heard the voices of another era, an era when one was proud of being an American. The residents were the first to sing out in pride for their country. Subsequently, their loved ones and invited guests added their voices. The residents of this nursing home truly taught us a lesson that day: American Pride!

Another moving portion of this ceremony was the playing of taps. The trumpeter was positioned in the hallway. Paul was asked for the names of any fallen soldiers that he wished to be remembered. He mentioned just a few. One could tell his years of life had dimmed the memory of their names. After a couple of names were mentioned, the sounds of taps rang through the building. To my surprise, the trumpeter played it in open key. What a wonderful sound it made. One could picture the scene on a hill in Normandy. Again, he played taps, but in a muted way. It sounded like an echo, as if the trumpeter had retreated into the hills. It was at this point in the ceremony that one could not hear another sound in that building other than the notes of taps. It was a moment not soon to be forgotten.

The formal ceremony was completed. It was now time for the five women residents to receive their honorable mention and flowers. What a moving and lovely sight. Each woman was called to the podium. I read each woman's name with a description of what she had done during the war effort. The Vice French Consul, to my surprise, rose from her chair and prepared to meet each woman and shake her hand. It was heartwarming for me to see this unplanned move. I knew then that she, too, agreed that these women should be honored and had decided on her own accord to participate in a ceremony that she had initially rejected. Paul was handed the roses in his wheelchair to present to the women. The nurse guided each resident to Paul. Some could walk if assisted. Two of the women had to be wheeled to the podium while a walker guided the last woman. With the help of a kind and

compassionate nurse, these frail women reached Paul. Paul handed each woman her bouquet and spoke a quiet thank you. What a beautiful sight! An old soldier thanking the women who worked long shifts in factories to make the supplies needed during a long-ago war. This was an honor that was a long time in coming but finally these women received the thank you and honor they so rightfully deserved. The representatives of the Veterans of Foreign Wars approached me at the end of the ceremony. They congratulated me for honoring the women and felt remorse that they had never done this before. It is my hope that they carry on with their enthusiasm. This is a generation that is quickly passing. There is little time left to honor them.

As the ceremony was came to a close, I thanked our invited guests and included these closing thoughts. "The residents of this nursing home have shared with me the most wonderful stories of their lives and it is an honor for me to share their stories with you. I encourage you to visit a nursing home and spend some time talking to the residents. They would find it gratifying and it would bring sunshine into these elderly people's lives."

The ceremony officially concluded and the guests went on to enjoy the refreshments. Paul's son told me that his father wanted to speak to me. When I approached Paul, he held out his hand and handed me a single rose with a veteran's poppy flower attached. A female representative of the Veterans of Foreign Wars had presented it to Paul during the ceremony. Paul thanked me for what I had done. As a social worker, I will always remember this experience. I will remember that one small act can reach out to a far greater number and create a deeper intergenerational and organizational understanding of each other.

### Postscript

Paul passed away four years later at the age of 87. In his obituary there is a brief statement: "He was belatedly awarded a commemorative certificate of appreciation from the French government." This, indeed, illustrates the value of social work: good practice not only opens doors but also allows

closure. No one individual is too young or too old to reap the benefits of social work services.

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