

Remembering Douglas H. Sprenkle

by Fred P. Piercy



Douglas H. Sprenkle died peacefully in his sleep on August 15 after a battle with pancreatic cancer. He was a good man, loving husband, father and grandfather, and a giant in the field of marriage and family therapy. He was also my friend.

William Wordsworth once said, "The best portion of a good man's life is his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love." Doug certainly made a difference to the field, but it was his mentoring—those acts of kindness he gave freely—that have had reverberations throughout the field of family therapy for decades. Many of his students have become leaders themselves, and likewise carry on the generosity of spirit that they experienced from Doug.

I met Doug around 1980. I remember him being hard to read initially. He seemed serious and intense. Our colleague, Wallace Denton, put me straight. Wallace said, "Doug is a prince of a person," and he was right. Professionally, Doug's work shaped our field, and I feel so fortunate to be witness to this.

Doug received his bachelor's in Government from Wesleyan University (1963), a masters from Princeton Theological Seminary (1967), and a masters (1973) and doctorate (1975) in Family Social Science with a minor in Psychology from the University of Minnesota. Doug spent his entire post-doctoral career of 39 years with the Marriage and Family Therapy program, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, at Purdue University. He was Purdue's MFT program director from 1985 to 1994 and again from 2003 to 2014. Doug also maintained a small private practice in Lafayette, Indiana.

When Doug visited Virginia Tech, one of my students called him a rock star. That seems fitting since the breadth of his contributions is unprecedented in the history of family therapy. How many leading scholars in the field do you know who have also won two national teaching awards, directed a leading doctoral program, served as a state MFT President; served the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) as the Editor of their flagship journal, the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, for two four-year terms, served as a member of the Commission on Accreditation, as Treasurer and member of the AAMFT Board, and as board member and Treasurer of the International Family Therapy Association.

In 1974, the National Council on Family Relations awarded Doug its Outstanding Student Award—given to the student with the "greatest potential to make an outstanding contribution to the field of family studies." Well, Doug obviously lived up to his potential since he went on to win **seven** major national family awards, including most recently, AAMFT's Outstanding Contributions to Marriage and Family Therapy Award.

Doug was a prolific author who wrote over 130 refereed journal articles and was cited over 6,000 times. His very first paper, published in *Family Relations* in 1975 was titled "The Need for the Integration of Theory, Research, and Practice in the Family Field." Doug's career has embodied that integration. As for research, AAMFT awarded Doug its prestigious Cumulative Career Contribution to Family Therapy Research Award, which recognized his many research publications and books, including, with Sidney

Moon, his wife, and me, two editions of *Family Therapy Research Methods*. Doug also edited (with Ron Chenail) *Effectiveness Research in Couple and Family Therapy*, the second such decade review of family therapy research that he has edited. Doug also teamed up with Joseph Wetchler and me on the *Family Therapy Sourcebook*. He also taught the first formal course in the nation on family therapy research in 1978.

Regarding his contributions to theory, Doug had a passionate interest in the integration of family theories since his days as a graduate student, when he co-developed with David Olson and Candyce Russell, the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems—which sought to integrate a potpourri of family concepts into a model that resulted in two and then later three dimensions—cohesion, adaptability, and communication. Similarly, his most recent book, *Common Factors in Couple and Family Therapy: The Overlooked Foundation for Effective Practice* (with Sean Davis and Jay Lebow) reflects the passion he had for theory integration.

Doug has my vote as the best editor in the history of the *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*. His editorship helped shape the field. He brought scholars together for special issues, emphasized the need for research on certain topics, and orchestrated unforgettable debates. He had the knack for reaching out to the best people in the field and raising the status of the journal in the process.

Doug's influence on the field can also be seen in the large number of distinguished graduates who have made major contributions to the field, whether it be as scholars, educators, or dynamic clinicians. Eighteen of Doug's students are serving or have served as faculty members at COAMFTE-accredited MFT programs, seven are current or former directors of COAMFTE programs, and eight won the AAMFT Research award.

One might conclude from all of Doug's accomplishments that there were actually Sprenkle twins or triplets, all busy at work. An alternate hypothesis is that Doug must have been a *dull* guy who worked too much. Well, he wasn't dull—lovably idiosyncratic, maybe. I'll share a few "Doug stories" to let you know what I mean and to humanize him a bit.

There's the story of Doug in graduate school at the University of Minnesota slipping his shoes off in the library and then, not being able to find them, walking home in the snow in his socks.

And then there was the time when Doug got up in the morning, went to his garage, and his car was missing. It was only after he reported it stolen to the police that he remembered that he'd left it in front of his optometrist's office the day before and had walked first to his office and then home. Doug would tell such stories and laugh until he cried.

At the end of each year I was at Purdue, an end-of-the-year party always involved students doing skits that captured the faculties' most obvious foibles. An anthropologist would call this a leveling ritual because the students pulled no punches and definitely leveled the hierarchy, at least for the evening. More than one skit involved Doug's idiosyncrasies, from curling up his legs in his chair like a swami, to eating giant carrots, to absent-mindedly nibbling French fries off a stranger's plate. He was a good sport and clearly one of a kind.

Finally, let me reflect on Doug as my mentor and friend. I knew Doug for almost 40 years and worked with him for 18 years at Purdue University. Truthfully, nobody has had more of an influence on my professional life than Doug Sprenkle had. When I first came to Purdue, Doug suggested that we meet for lunch once a week, just to chat. We talked about everything—football, politics, our families, and family

therapy. Those weekly meetings lasted years. Out of those mentoring chats came a great friendship and a productive professional relationship.

Along the way, I got to know Doug's professionalism, high standards, personal integrity, and yes, generosity of spirit. I will miss Doug. We all will. Thanks, Doug, for all you've done, for what you have meant to us, and for who we've become in the process of knowing you. You've made us all better.

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