

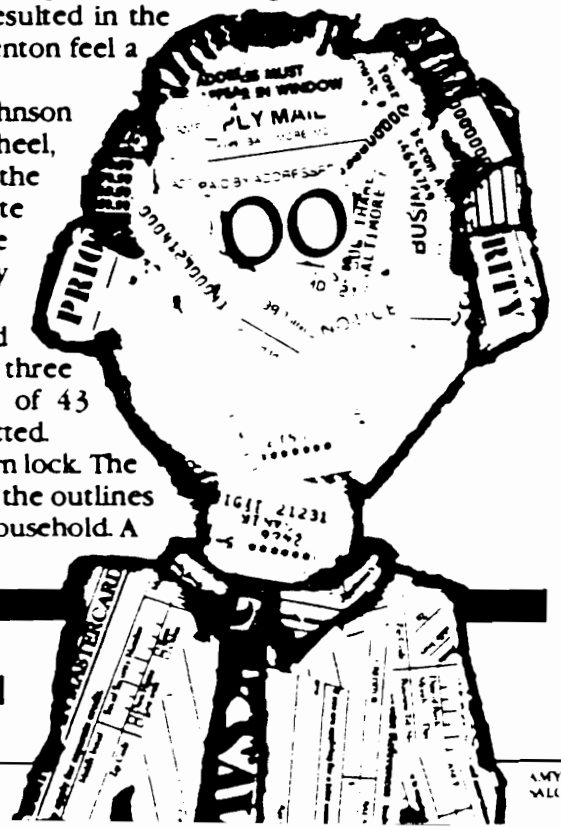
Pile Therapy

*Hope springs eternal for the
guilt-ridden brochure saver*

LATE ON A TUESDAY EVENING, FENTON POLL herded his smoking 1973 Pinto into the driveway. Faded remnants of a Carter/Mondale sticker clung to the bumper. Fenton decided that the off-green and white complemented the flat red Rustoleum splotches adorning the rear panel. Besides, the fading had resulted in the sticker reading "Car Mon," making Fenton feel a bit like Don Johnson on a stakeout.

Maneuvering his portlier-than-Johnson figure from behind the steering wheel, Fenton slammed, then reslammed, the Pinto door. As he shifted his leatherette briefcase to a free hand to pick up the paper, he sensed something vaguely different in the air, a kind of tingling — a foreboding. He shrugged, gathered up the mail, and puffed his way up the three steps to his front door. "Is a man of 43 supposed to wheeze like this?" he fretted.

Fenton jiggled the key in the stubborn lock. The house was dark, but he could still see the outlines of the familiar mounds festooning his household. A



BY JAY LAPPIN

testimony to the bachelor professional's life, there were piles everywhere: socks, old newspapers, magazines, records, bills, clothes. You name it—it had a pile. It was a compulsive's nightmare. The most conspicuous heap of all occupied a corner of the dining room. Fenton's habit was to throw all his professional junk mail into that particular corner.

There were flyers and promotional materials on starting a marriage, ending a marriage, surviving a marriage, sex, sex education, educating the elderly, elderly sex, chemical dependency with the non-verbal, hypnosis with resistant clients, hypnosis with resistant colleagues, hypnosis with farm animals, and so on.

Fenton felt guilty about throwing away flyers. It seemed to him they were subtly written to make him feel uninformed, incompetent, or somehow callously neglectful of his patients' needs. They resurrected that nagging feeling that he needed to achieve more in life and constantly reminded him of his intention to do so—tomorrow.

So he held onto flyers, determined to thoroughly review them one day and map out his year's professional development. But whenever he leafed through them he could never make up his mind what to attend and always wound up putting off the decision. It could wait.

Fenton walked through the gray living room, tossed his coat onto the couch and continued into the dining room.

"Carl?" he called.

Nothing.

His closest companion was his dog Carl Rogers. Carl for short, so named because he had unconditional positive regard and practiced reflective barking.

"He must be sacked out on the bed guarding the pillows," Fenton surmised.

Flicking on the light, he gingerly extracted his thick black glasses so as not to tear their taped hinges, and sorted through today's computerized correspondence. This time, he was informed, Mrs. Fenton Poll had *definitely* won a prize in Category 1, a new Mercedes, a \$5,000 bond, or \$2500 in cash. All she need do was tour the new facilities at Palomino Pines and supply meager proof of financial eligibility. Too bad Mrs. Poll had divorced Fenton some three years ago. He had survived this experience much as he had survived the marriage—through avoidance.

Fenton absently wandered into the kitchen, opened the freezer top and pried out a half-empty, rubber-banded box of mozzarella sticks. He thrust it into the microwave. As he stood alert to the

timer, he continued the evening ritual of sorting his mail.

Insta-Cash was offering to buy his house (which Fenton rented). Lightening-Lube was featuring an electronic automatic transmission diagnosis (Fenton drove a stick). And the Behavioral Science Book Service listed the latest must-read discounts.

The fact that he never checked the "I do not want this month's selection" part of the flyer meant that he constantly got books packed in brown cardboard. These too he managed to save, but kept them in an uncharacteristically neat arrangement on his bookshelves. A visitor to Fenton's study was greeted by row upon row of orderly brown packages. To Fenton, it was like having the complete Beatles collection still in cellophane.

Munching a half-frozen mozzarella stick, Fenton reached into his coat pocket, carefully, so as not to further enlarge the hole in the lining, and rescued the half-dozen other flyers he'd received at the office. Whereas his home delivery identified him as "occupant," his office circulars officiously addressed him as "Dr. Fenton Poll, Associate Director, South Brookeville Community Mental Health Center."

Fenton was secretly impressed about seeing his title in print. True, it signified achievements he had neither sought nor expected, but longevity in the clinic had produced its reward, even when ambition waned. And though his office wore the simulated carpeting of the Johnson Era War on Poverty, Fenton chose to view this as proof of an unpretentious nature.

Dutifully tossing the flyers into his professional mail pile (now approximately the height and bulk of Gary Coleman on a good day), Fenton ambled into his bedroom to find Carl. "Maybe he's under the bed," thought Fenton, remembering Carl's habit of hiding when he is frightened or depressed. "C'mon Carl, I'm sorry, I'm late," he pleaded. "Hey, I'll give you two Milkbones!"

"Rediscover your cycles of power."

Fenton froze.

"Share this opportunity with a colleague," intoned a voice from the living room.

Fenton rose slowly, his stomach suddenly tight, squeezing his breath. "Who, who is it?" he squeaked.

"A charter invitation to receive this innovative professional journal on the new frontiers of psychotherapy."

Fenton began to sweat though his hands were ice cold. He stood



motionless, caught between fright and flight. He knew he had heard those phrases before. He also knew that he had forgotten them as soon as he had heard them. "Nobody talks like that," thought a bewildered Fenton. "This must be some sick mind's idea of a joke—perhaps a mugger who specializes in therapists. But why me? Everybody knows that therapists without a private practice are impoverished."

"Because you are committed to clinical excellence, but your time is limited as ever, you'll want to know about..." the voice intruded into his reverie.

Fenton couldn't stand it. He had to see who was talking to him. He forced himself slowly, step by step, into the living room. Fenton could barely make out a shape perched on the far end of his overstuffed couch. It wasn't a man and it wasn't a woman. Its shape was roughly human, with arms, legs, hands, and a head. But it was made out of paper.

Thousands of envelopes, pamphlets, flyers and family therapy training brochures were stuck together in a rough approximation of the human body. The arms were a mixture of marital therapy envelopes, with a smattering of alcohol and substance abuse flyers saying "Ski Denver." The legs were folders promoting workshops on centering and grounding, featuring interactive group bio-aerobic energy relaxation exercises endorsed by Jane Fonda. The head was entirely composed of strategic biofeedback and alphaswave transmittal brochures, and sexual therapy pamphlets occupied an appropriate part of the anatomy.

Fenton was dazed. He didn't know what to do. The Pile seemed to give off a soft glow, a luminescence. The house felt as if it were humming and Fenton could only resonate to this mysterious harmonic. He knew only that he was alone in the house with some unprecedented life form—and Carl had chosen this, of all times, to be nondirective.

"I know that the only way you can learn anything new is in an altered state, with the connection with the right brain," admonished the Pile, now in a woman's voice. "I'd like you to do something for me now. I'd like you to give yourself a hug."

An awestruck Fenton watched his arms move involuntarily up to his chest, cross themselves, and then squeeze. The Pile rotated its head to Fenton, smiled, and cooed, "Now, doesn't that feel better?"

Much to his amazement, Fenton found that he did, in fact, feel better. He made another attempt to talk, but found that his

mouth felt like the inside of a blow dryer. "What is this thing?" he puzzled.

"Therapy for the Eighties," came the reply.

"Aha!" gasped Fenton, as it suddenly dawned on him that The Pile was repeating words, phrases, and copious copy from the brochures which composed it. That was scary enough. What was even scarier was that The Pile could read his mind! But awareness, Fenton remembered, is the key to action, and with bolstered courage he lowered his arms and managed to utter, "Hello."

The Pile responded with a cordial nod. A perspiring Fenton rummaged through his storehouse of therapeutic gimmicks, searching for his next move. "I have to find a way to join with this thing," he decided.

"Joining is the glue that holds the therapeutic system together," said The Pile with an Argentinian accent.

"Uh, yes," replied Fenton with a weak smile. "Would you like something to drink?" he asked, not really sure if it was capable of drinking anything.

"Activate your senses," said The Pile.

"Thank you," said Fenton. "I think I will join you."

Fenton turned on rubber legs and walked into the kitchen, quickly grabbing two slightly mungy glasses out of the dishwasher and pouring a couple of stiff bourbons. He returned to the living room and set the glasses down, watching The Pile with a mixture of bewilderment and shock.

"Sorry I don't have any coasters."

Fenton managed to mumble, feeling that he wasn't being a good host.

"No problem," responded The Pile as it began to pull a Neuro-Linguistic Programming flyer off its forearm.

"No!" Fenton yelled, lunging forward, thinking that The Pile would explode, as if detaching a flyer was like pulling the pin out of a hand grenade. He watched helplessly as The Pile held up a hand, smiled and said, "It's nothing," and continued to pull the flyer off, set it on the coffee table and then put the glass on top of it. Fenton exhaled and watched as The Pile took a drink.

"Listen to the masters demonstrate their interventions with incredible lifelikeness," suggested The Pile, apparently referring to his vast number of audio and video cassette tape leaflets. "Learn to apply these skills in the privacy of your living room or while negotiating rush-hour traffic."

Appreciating the invitation, as well as the calming effect of the bourbon, Fenton



spent that evening and most of the morning dialoging about therapy. The Pile answered exclusively in brochure quotes, changing its voice in gender and tone to match the school of thought or master therapist whose material best fit Fenton's questions.

Whatever the topic, The Pile seemed to know just what to say. Like stopping smoking: "The therapist should integrate the clinical concerns of psychodynamically-oriented therapists with the powerful technology of behavioral therapy." Then it added, "Plus we have thousands of great home improvement values you can't pass up!" The latter quote seemed to come from a K-Mart flyer inadvertently stuck to The Pile's thigh. "It needs work," mused Fenton, but even he could see the potential.

The next morning Fenton called in sick. A plan had begun to dawn in his head. Somehow he would find a use for The Pile's peculiar talents. "You have to be more conversational, quit talking like a brochure," suggested Fenton.

"Believe in the incredible you," replied The Pile.

"Now cut that out!" cried Fenton, reaching for a crumpled pack of cigarettes. The Pile sat expressionless, a tabula rasa of pulp and advertising.

"This is never going to work," moaned Fenton, watching the smoke trail off his cigarette.

"Be a distributor," advised The Pile.

Fenton groaned.

"Learn how to dialogue among a group of married couples and enrich their relationships," continued The Pile.

"Forget it," lamented Fenton. "Here, just watch some TV."

As the old Motorola slowly came to life, Fenton abandoned The Pile to the couch and walked back into the kitchen to make some coffee. He found a darkish liquid on the Mr. Coffee and hit the warm switch. As the two-day-old brew began to heat up, Fenton's kitchen took on the familiar odor that permeates every outpatient clinic in America, the pungent bouquet of stale coffee.

Fenton wandered back toward the living room. There sat The Pile bobbing up and down. Fenton reached behind the TV and adjusted the horizontal hold button. Both picture and Pile stopped moving. Fenton sighed. "Well, what do you think?" he asked The Pile.

"Jolly good show! This 1952 whimsy sends David Niven on a daring mission to capture a prized heifer from the clutches of the Nazis. Glynis Johns also stars."

"Will you stop?" screamed Fenton.

"Relax, unwind, and have a few laughs with America's all-time favorite guessing game, 'Wheel of Fortune'!"

Fenton felt sick. "Look, you can't watch this junk. You'll get the wrong idea. If you're going to be successful, you need to be profound. Therapy's more than show-biz. You need to be able to cite obscure quotes, to number things so it looks like you're organized. In order to be an expert you have to appear deep, learn some first names and drop them at strategic points during a conversation. Here, say this: 'Gregory.'"

"Gregory," said The Pile impassively.

"Milton."

"Milton."

"Good, now say 'Sal,' but give it more of a touch of familiarity."

"Sal."

Convinced that The Pile was now on the right road, Fenton breathed a sigh of relief. "And quit watching this crap," insisted Fenton as he turned the dial on the TV. "Here, watch this," Fenton instructed as PBS's "The Day the Universe Changed (Part Four)" came on. The Pile seemed content to watch and an exhausted Fenton decided to lie down for a quick nap.

"Try to pick up some statistics," Fenton admonished The Pile. "Even if they have nothing to do with what you are talking about, you'll sound smart. I'm going to lie down for awhile. If you need anything, just wake me."

The Pile didn't answer. It seemed preoccupied with the show. "Good," thought Fenton as he wearily made his way to the bedroom. "Maybe I'll just be able to pull this off."

Drifting off to sleep on dingy sheets, Fenton's last thoughts were of fame, fortune, and seeing his name in lights. The Pile of his dreams took the workshop circuit by storm. He was hailed as The Pile's personal impresario, a combination of Henry Higgins, Pygmalion, and Don King. Pile Therapy emerged as *the* therapy. All the major training institutions — Ackerman, Philadelphia Child Guidance, MRI — crumbled under the pressure of The Pile. Insurance companies reimbursed only for "Pile-Certified Therapists." Drawing on an inexhaustible supply of flyers, The Pile performed live sessions employing every theory and therapeutic style from Freud to Madanes. The Pile fans numbered in the millions. The Pile had to be guarded by the Brain Rangers wherever he went.

Fenton saw himself walking past a newsstand on a busy city street. A huge stack of *People* magazines was on display

There on the cover was The Pile itself along with the headline, "Baryshnikov of the Brain."

But Fenton's dream of grandiosity slowly gave way to the fitful tossing of a little boy who had forgotten his homework, an all too familiar feeling. He awoke with a start and reached for a smoke. As he sat in silence, a wry smile began to come over his face as he heard the sound of the TV from the living room. "The Pile has been watching educational TV the entire time I've been asleep," thought Fenton delightedly. "Welcome to the world of subliminal self-improvement!" By now The Pile would have absorbed enough facts to make Carl Sagan look like a mental Smurf.

But as Fenton approached the living room, he did not hear the sound of the cosmos unfolding, but the theme song from "Jeopardy." Fenton stared in disbelief. The Pile was obviously much thinner. At its feet was a mass of mental health training brochures. The Pile now consisted solely of old TV Guides, Spencer Gift catalogues, and a National Enquirer. Fenton wanted to cry.

"What have you done? How could you?" he sobbed.

The Pile turned and said, "Stay tuned for 'The Best of Carson.'"

"Oh, God," wailed Fenton. "There's nothing left of you. You're not even a paper tiger! We were going to revolutionize mental health, turn it into a legitimate profession. And now, you're just a couch potato!"

Fenton sat down with a thump — demoralized, numb. He watched The Pile as if in an altered state. "Why couldn't *this* be the dream?" he whimpered to himself. But unfortunately this was real. Slowly, a familiar calm came over him.

"Perhaps it's for the best," Fenton thought with resignation.

He looked down and saw a lone family therapy brochure.

"Maybe if I... nah."

Just then a sudden gust of wind blew open the kitchen door, swept into the living room and in a matter of moments The Pile became just another one of Fenton's piles once more.

From behind him, Fenton heard a familiar thump, thump, thump coming from under the bed. There was Carl's tail peeking out from under the bed.

Fenton stood up and gave Carl a nod. "C'mon Carl, let's get you some milkbones. It's been a long day." ■

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