



BUILDING A LIFE WORTH LIVING. A MEMOIR

Marsha M. Linehan

New York: Random House, 2020

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In June 2011, Marsha— everyone calls her that—gave a lecture entitled «The personal story of the development of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)» in which she revealed the origin of her fight against the problems suffered by people at high risk of suicide. The beginning is not in the 80s with her first funded research on therapy for with people with borderline personality disorder, but a couple of decades earlier, in her eventful adolescence, in which she took a vow to help bring people out of hell, after being locked up in an asylum for two years. Her book *Building a Life Worth Living: A Memoir* can be understood as an extension of that lecture to a wider audience.

Without straying from the canon of memories, the story begins with a first part dedicated to her childhood and adolescence. Marsha presents herself as a child ill-adjusted to the bourgeois expectations of her mother, and who feels neither understood nor loved: a rebel. I wrote «presents herself », but in reality—and this is one of the book's weaknesses—instead Marsha narrates what other flattering witnesses remember of the time. Her high school friend, her sister Aline, her therapists, her spiritual mentors, her students, her friends and colleagues, her Peruvian “daughter” Geraldine, all the significant people end up making their contribution to the most flattering parts of the portrait of the protagonist. At first, she attributes this to the weakness of her memory due to the electroconvulsive therapy sessions received, but as her story approaches the present, this explanation fades and remains as only a poor literary resource.

In the second part, she describes the beginning of her academic journey and her approach to the therapy of people with self-injurious behaviors based on the lack of evidence of current psychotherapies, mainly psychoanalysis, of which she can barely hide her skepticism even in the practice of the luminary Otto Kernberg. At the same time, her spirituality was evolving from the conventionalism of the Catholic religion to the conventionalism of Zen, which she ended up integrating into her behavior therapy in the form of mindfulness and radical acceptance, hallmarks of what are known today as third generation behavioral therapies. Among the milestones of her spiritual evolution, she attaches special healing importance to her mystical experience—a form of *apophenia* in Conrad's terminology—in a chapel during her stay at Loyola University. After that, finally reconciled with herself, she leaves hell behind with the personal keys to a new psychotherapy.

In the third part, the almost didactic description of the essential elements of her therapy is interspersed with the account of its consolidation at the University of Washington, the beginnings of her research on the efficacy of DBT, and her deepening in Zen spirituality, in which she progresses from novice to favorite student, and from teacher to Zen master.

Finally, her manual was published in 1993, and its publisher, we now know, forced her to include the words «cognitive-behavioral» in the title: *Cognitive-behavioral therapy for borderline personality disorder*. The culmination of her work. The vow fulfilled, as the voice of God, in a new appearance, acknowledges her humbly.

Before returning to her most personal lecture, Marsha ends her story with the account of the reconstruction of her unique family life where we glimpse the depths of her personality. Marsha doesn't like living alone. We know that her reconciliation with her siblings has come at an age too mature for cohabitation. Those with whom she has platonic relationships never end up cohabiting with her. Her stage of living in shared flats with penniless lodgers has been left behind. So, at almost 50 years of age, through an advertisement seeking an intern, she begins to live with a girl and then, when the girl gets married, the new couple settles in the basement of the house; after that, Marsha helps them buy the adjoining house, which they join together through the garden; then the young couple have a child... Then everything ends. But Marsha doesn't stay alone for long. In a twist that, had the protagonist or the narrator been another, would have been extremely unsettling—and made the preceding 300 pages insubstantial!—Marsha begins to live with Geraldine, a 16-year-old girl recently arrived from Peru. The girl studies, learns English, interacts with her peers, marries—Marsha is second mom at her wedding—and the couple move to the shared house, where the three live together happily; now also with Catalina, the couple's daughter.

It has always been said that to understand psychotherapy well, you have to know the life of its advocates. Now, in my opinion, this brings us closer to the person as much as it distances us from the therapy, as if revealing the secret of its construction were to break its spell.

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