

A TRIBUTE TO STELLA CHESS

Today we come together to remember Stella Chess, an esteemed colleague and cherished friend. Four and a half years ago many of us met in this same hall to bid farewell to Alexander Thomas, her dear husband and distinguished collaborator.

I am Bill Carey, a pediatrician from Philadelphia. As before, I am a representative non-psychiatric colleague from outside of New York, a person who knew and admired her from another place and a different discipline for almost 40 years.

Much of what I said then in 2003 about the enormous scientific contributions of this remarkable team can be presented again now, but that will be followed by some thoughts about the uniqueness and outstanding qualities of Stella herself.

The received psychiatric wisdom of the 1940's and 1950's when Stella and Alex emerged from their training was that the environment, and in particular the child's mother, was responsible for all of children's behavioral and emotional problems. However, their own clinical observations and their experience as parents of four different children informed them that their teaching, especially the psychoanalytic view, had been inadequate. In 1956 they focused their varied research interests on temperament differences in children, those normal and largely innate behavioral style traits that influence how the individual experiences and responds to particular environmental settings.

The New York Longitudinal Study of Thomas and Chess and colleagues defined the nature, clinical significance, and appropriate management of these normal stylistic traits. Their extensive evaluation of 133 New York children over a period of about 30

years has become one of the most important advances in the world's thinking about human development. They demonstrated the existence and the clinical significance of these temperament differences for the development of normal and deviant behavior and showed how to manage them successfully mainly by improving the parent-child interaction. The important concept of the "goodness of fit" explained that what mattered most is not just the characteristics of the child or of the environment but the harmony or disharmony between them. Many of the adjustment problems in the child could be resolved simply by helping the parents to understand and tolerate better a normal but annoying temperament of the child and to work with it rather than against it. This was particularly good news to those of us in primary care, where most of these issues arise.

The mental health establishment did not immediately embrace these brilliant insights. Nevertheless, acceptance has been coming gradually and by now has reached the point where many have forgotten the indifference and fierce opposition Stella and Alex had to endure at the outset. The impact of their findings on other disciplines and in other countries has been enormous. Among these examples we might mention that the parent questionnaires concerning children's temperaments based on their view, which were devised by Sean McDevitt, some other colleagues and me, have been translated into dozens of foreign languages and used throughout the world.

Unfortunately, as often happens in the history of new ideas, some current theorists have carried their views too far. Much present speculation holds that not normal variations but malfunctions of the brain of the child are responsible for virtually all his or her adjustment problems and that the environment matters little or not at all. One hopes

that this excessive emphasis on nature will soon be moderated as was the excessive emphasis on nurture before Stella and Alex began their work. There is good reason to believe that their interactionist view of nature and nurture is right and that it will eventually emerge as the best explanation.

To describe Stella herself we can make use of two sources: comments she wrote about her life and what we witnessed ourselves in our own contacts with her.

Fourteen years ago, in 1993, Stella and Alex wrote an unusual joint autobiography. Their *Fifty Years Together* was a remarkable feat of documenting their parallel but interconnected lives. It was apparently privately published and intended mainly for their grandchildren: Lori, Richard, Amy, Sarah, Andrew and Nathan. I hope that their fascinating narrative can be made available to a larger readership.

From their account we learn that both of her parents were immigrants from Russia, people who by virtue of their hard work and personal endowments achieved professional status, her father as a lawyer and her mother a teacher. Her mother set an example of dedication by refusing to withdraw from the classroom when she was pregnant. Stella was born in the Bronx in a snowstorm. The doctor was delayed by the weather so Stella decided that she could not wait and just appeared anyway. Her resourcefulness was evident early as when at age 4 she, who did not yet know how to read and later discovered that she was dyslexic, taught her grandmother how to read English. (The secret is that she memorized the text from her older sister.) Once she did learn to read, she became an avid, omnivorous bookworm

“All my family could talk. Some nice. Some nasty. But believe me they could talk and argue. If you didn’t learn how to talk up you might as well be lost.”

She described herself as being “slow to warm up,” one of the temperament clusters their study defined in detail. She offered an example of this as when she was taking premedical courses at Smith College. It took gradual, repeated exposure to the necessity of killing an experimental frog before she could accomplish it.

Her decision to go into medicine received a mixed review from her parents. Two uncles were in the debate too. “Oh, Stella won’t do it,” one said. “Oh, yes she will,” the other uncle replied, “because when Stella says she’s going to do a thing she always does it.”

In medical school at NYU, where she started in 1935, psychiatry was only an elective subject. Her first impression was that “psychiatry is for the birds.” However, after hearing two stimulating and humane lectures by Loretta Bender, then the director of the children’s unit at Bellevue Hospital, she became convinced that child psychiatry was what she wanted to pursue. Dr Bender also helped her about how to deal with unacceptable theories of others, “First say who you are and then what you think and why.”

I first learned of her and her research in 1960. In 1968 I ventured over to her office in New York to discuss the possibility of making temperament a more easily usable concept in practical clinical work and research by devising a simplified questionnaire to assess the 9 traits in just 20 minutes (instead of 2-3 hours).. Beside her cordiality I chiefly remember that as I left she presented me with her judgment that I must be highly

persistent, one of their more desirable temperament traits. When my family has subsequently offered the different interpretation that I am just stubborn, I have to remind them that the highest expert available had a more flattering assessment.

Those of us who have carried the Chess and Thomas orientation into our various worlds of pediatrics, psychology, education and elsewhere are unanimous in having found her an outstanding researcher, clinician, teacher, advisor, writer, and friend. This was surely an unusual combination.

Stella and Alex were true giants of modern medicine. Their contributions to our understanding of human development are enormous. When the current controversies subside, those two will stand out as some of the clearest observers of children's behavior. They were also great human beings: wise, brave, kind, and modest.

We join family, friends and colleagues in expressing our deep sadness at the loss of our dear friend, Stella. But it was a joy and a privilege to know her.

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