Editorial: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Page

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EDITORIAL:
ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS PAGE

Ronald J. Chenail

Recently, I had the opportunity to see the movie, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and I was struck by the similarities between the lives of the characters in the movie and the situations editors, reviewers, and authors face in the manuscript development process. In the movie, people have the option of having the painful memories of past relationships systematically erased from their minds. The theory being that, if they can rid themselves of all of the images, feelings, and thoughts that haunt them from relationships gone bad (i.e., the spotless mind), then they can move forward in their lives and begin to live and love once again (i.e., the eternal sunshine). When I watched the movie, I was struck by the irony of the characters' attempts to change or improve their lives by having all of the sorrow-ridden memories of these soured relationships removed from their psyches. Their anticipated eternal sunshine was soon replaced by their heart-felt longing to revisit or recapture some of the good that was lost with the bad.

In the case of journal authors, reviewers, and editors, I think we all long for the eternal sunshine of the spotless page—manuscript after manuscript of captivating prose, clear and compelling arguments, significant contributions to the body of marital and family therapy knowledge, and no typos or APA errors! What a wonderful world this would be indeed. But, as I contemplated this sunny world of spotless manuscripts, I began to grow as uneasy as the characters did in the movie.

I think this editorial utopia bothered me because I am not sure if anyone learns anything from perfection. We can appreciate perfection, and we can aim for it, but I do not think it is the actual achievement of perfection that makes the difference in our lives. Rather, I think it is the journey towards perfection that makes the difference when it comes to us becoming better authors, reviewers, and editors.

Since July 2004, I have worked on slightly more than 90 JMFT articles along with their authors and reviewers at various stops on this editorial journey: The initial submission, my screening for fit with the journal's editorial mission, the selection of referees, the reading of reviews, the rendering of editorial decisions, the revising process, the editing, and finally, the publication. Despite the uniformity of our review forms and the categories of editorial verdicts, I can safely say each of these 90 plus journeys is unique in its own patterns of pleasures and pains. Furthermore, depending on the variety of the reviews, each paper sojourn can seem like multiple treks occurring on separate planes of existence!

Driving these various journeys is the tension that arises from the metaphoric juxtaposition of the “this-ness” of the manuscript’s particularities with the “that-ness” of the essence of what makes a paper a “JMFT paper” (Burke, 1945/1969, p. 503). In theory, it seems, a JMFT paper is a manuscript of the highest quality, one that helps to advance our knowledge of research, theory, clinical practice, and training in marital and family therapy; however, as Jan L. A. van de Snepscheut, the Dutch–American computer scientist and educator, would say, “In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But, in practice, there is.” And that is the greatest challenge with each and every paper: What are the differences that make a difference when it comes to making the call that a paper is, indeed, a JMFT paper? Or to paraphrase the famous quote by Warren McCulloch (1965, p. 2), “What is a JMFT paper, that a reviewer, author, and editor may know it and a reviewer, author, and editor, that they may know a JMFT paper?”

In reflecting on all the papers and reviews that I have read and re-read these last few months, I have to say that I am still discovering what a JMFT paper is and how people know one when they read one. For some reviewers, an important aspect of this defining process is the author's ability to speak clearly to the world of marital and family therapists as compared with those offering generic messages to all mental health practitioners. For other reviewers, it is an author's skill to transcend the world of marriage and family therapy and to illuminate critical connections and contrasts with the realms of psychology, social work, counseling, and medicine. For other reviewers still, it is the author's rhetorical artistry in articulating a
compelling argument in response to that dreadful two-word question, “So what?” And the list goes on and on and so do my lessons.

So, what are an author, a reviewer, and an editor to do? How can we collectively make this journey toward excellence, if not perfection, one that is beneficial, informative, and supportive for all parties with a stake in these proceedings? First and foremost, I think we need to strive for transparency in our communications. As author, editor, and reviewer, we need to be forthright, respectful, and also clear in our messages, and if our messages are not clear, respectful, forthright, and helpful, then please let me know. It is only through such earnest conversation that we can hope to approach clarity.

I think we can also turn to research to help us address this challenge. There are plenty of papers published in JMFT whose authors have examined publishing patterns in this journal as well as other leading marital and family therapy periodicals (e.g., Faulkner, Klock, & Gale, 2002), and the editors of JMFT have published annual reports on submission and publication rates for years, but we can probably do better in examining our editorial practices and publishing the results of such inquiries. There is a considerable body of literature on all aspects of the editorial endeavor published in journals such as Scholarly Communications Report and Scholarly Publishing, and I think it is important for us as an editorial community to study our own processes and outcomes and make these results public in order to challenge ourselves in the light of these findings. In addition, by sharing these results, I think we will strive to make it more transparent what is meant by a “JMFT paper” and what authors can do to achieve such a status for their work and what we can do as editors and reviewers to nurture them in this goal. To this end, I am interested in receiving proposals and suggestions as to research, evaluation, and assessment we can conduct to help us to understand our editorial processes and outcomes better and to enact change based on these efforts.

In closing, I want to return to the film that opened this essay. As some of you may know, the movie’s title, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, was inspired by the line in Alexander Pope’s poem, “Eloisa to Abelard” (Butt, 1963, pp. 252–261). When I read the poem, I was inspired to adapt the following “heroic couplets” from Pope’s poem as a way to express what the editorial enterprise sometimes feels like for all parties concerned or at least, how it sometimes feels to me.

**Editor to Able Bards**

*(As inspired by Alexander Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard”)*

Ronald J. Chenail

In these deep solitudes and awful emails,  
Where academic’ly-pensive contemplation dwells,  
And ever-amusing melancholy reigns;  
What means this tumult in this editor’s veins?  
Why rove my thoughts beyond this last issue?  
Why feels my body its long-suffering tissue?  
Yet, yet I love! — From JMFT it came,  
But as editor it’s published in my name.  

Dear blind review! rest ever unreveal’d,  
Nor pass these lips in legal silence seal’d.  
Hide it, my heart, within that close disguise,  
Where mix’d with my edits, a verdict’s surprise:  
O write it not, my hand—a new draft appears  
Already written—wash it out, my tears!  
In revision lost an author weeps and prays,  
The heart still dictates, and the hand obeys.  

How happy is this editor’s prospect!  
No words rejecting, by the word perfect.  
Eternal sunshine of the spotless page!
Each paper accepted, and each wish engaged;
Labour and rest, that equal periods keep;
“Many able bards that can wake and weep;”
Reviews compos’d, acceptance ever ev’n,
Articles that delight, and pubs that waft to Heav’n.

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