MOVING HIS GROWING EDGE FORWARD:
AN INTERVIEW WITH MILTON M. BERGER, M.D.

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I met Milt Berger and his lovely wife, Lynne, six months before I decided to write this article, at a mutual friend's dinner party. After dinner Milt and I gravitated toward the same comfortable couch and began to talk about boating. I do not now recall what the transition was, but our conversation soon turned toward group therapy and the history of the American Group Psychotherapy Association. Too quickly it was interrupted by a friend of Milt's, and we did not get a chance to resume our talk that evening.

I had become curious about this very bright and energetic man. When the opportunity arose to interview him for GROUP I accepted it. I expected to have some difficulty in setting up a mutual time to get together, but Milt was completely receptive to the idea, and we quickly found a convenient block of time. The meeting took place on a blisteringly cold Friday in January. An icy cold wind speeded my journey to his office. I arrived 10 minutes early. Milt greeted me at the door, his solid burly appearance and strong handshake warming my blood and quieting whatever anxiety I harbored about the interview. He informed me that he was still with a patient but took the time to help me off with my coat, then ushered me into his waiting room.

Arriving early enabled me to observe my surroundings. I have spent some time in my life sitting in waiting rooms—waiting for doctors, supervisors, analysts and friends still in session. It seems that all of these rooms reflect some aspect of their owners, even those that attempt total neutrality. Few show anything really personal, but Milt's does, reflecting what I came to know as the central quality of the man. The room exudes a quiet comfortable clutter. The walls are filled with lithographs, posters and photographs. There are two in particular that caught my eye: a Magritte poster, Le Fils de L'Homme, and The Seer by Edo Harson. The latter in particular interested me. It is a portrait of a man who outwardly bears no physical resemblance to Milt, but I got a strong sense that there is some similarity—perhaps it is the searching expression around the eyes. Cartoons line the side of one wall. The room itself is filled with furniture, stacks of magazines and videotapes. There is a large vase with dried flowers and a few scattered jade plants. The room is filled almost to overflow, and seated there, I felt that I was about to become acquainted with a man who fills every moment of his day as well. As I was taking in my impressions, Milt entered the room with his patient and introduced us. As the three of us stood talking for a few moments about therapy, I sensed the mutual respect that Milt and this man showed each other.

After the man left, Milt took me into a room behind the waiting room. It was filled with articles and videotapes. Quickly he went through the shelves, hand-
ing me articles and journals that he had either edited or written. Within a few minutes I was overwhelmed, not only by the way my arms were being laden with papers, but also by his energetic force. When we passed through the waiting room, I put the papers down on a chair, then followed him into his office. What struck me was the similarity of the two rooms. The office seems like a much larger version of the waiting room. It brims over with books, equipment, videotapes, papers and furniture. It is a large and inviting room.

When we were seated (every seating place in the room looked comfortable) I took my tape recorder out to begin the “formal interview,” but in fact the interview had begun during the short time I waited for Milt. The rooms had conveyed what I was to experience over and over again—a sense of urgency and an energy that could hardly be contained.

I had just purchased a new tape recorder and for a moment suffered some anxiety over its use. Milt, sensing my discomfort, kindly showed me how to handle it. In planning the interview, I had thought that two hours would be ample time but I could not have been more wrong. At the end of the two hours, I felt that we had just begun. We both agreed to meet one more time. Before I left his office he presented me with a book called *Working with People Called Patients*. He autographed the copy and then quietly informed me that of everything he has ever written, he feels most proud of this book. I went out into the cold January air feeling pleased and looking forward to our next visit.

The next time we met I followed my outline more easily. I knew what I needed to cover. In our first meeting together, Milt had spoken about his role in the shaping of the history of the AGPA. He felt that some accounts contained certain distortions and that he needed to set the record straight. I had heard that Milt had a somewhat controversial reputation. I asked him about it and he welcomed the opportunity to discuss some of the reasons. He said that he still feels bewildered, angry and hurt. “It is hard to understand how people of good will...